

**MODERN SUSTAINABILITY APPROACHES IN TRANSFORMATION OF  
PROTECTED LANDSCAPES INTO LEISURESCAPE: RUSSALKA  
HOLIDAY VILLAGE, BULGARIA**

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**Abstract:** *Details of establishment and construction history of “Russalka Holiday Village” in the context of mass tourism, including its present state following the years after the regime collapse in 1989 contextualize application of environmental strategies implemented in its original modernistic urban, architectural and landscape design.*

*Highlighting the influence of nature and environment in its architectural and horticulture agenda, the discussion emphasizes the polarities between the modern architecture’s approaches and the contemporary sustainability discourse of designing a resort within a wild protected area on one hand and the quality of comfort and the tourist services addressing the modern paradigm for “leisure for all” on the other.*

*Purged from the regime ideology, the research opens the debate about evaluation and heritage protection within the national legislative framework and preservation of “Russalka Holiday Village” in the context of the Bulgarian post-war modern architecture.*

**Key words:** *leisure era, modern architecture and sustainability, natural reserve, sustainable approach, symbiotic architecture, heritage at risk*

**1. Introduction. Modern architecture and the era of leisure and mass tourism**

The ideological basis for the development of mass tourism was set up in the pre-war years on the 5<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM 5, 1937) held in Paris with the proclamation of leisure that had been already defined as one of the four functions of modern urbanism for “an obligation of the community for all”. Thus the post-war optimism envisaged leisure as a social attainment of modernity and postulated the right for holidays and access to recreation for everyone. The new social-life model of the leisure era<sup>2</sup> claimed the onetime pre-war elite-reserved privileges for the middle working class addressing at the same time the potential of the landscape for relaxation, pleasure and healthy living. [1] [2]

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<sup>2</sup> Focus of the 5<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM 5) held in Paris from June 28 to July 2 of 1937 was precisely on the consequences of leisure in the design of the functional city demonstrated by its topic Logis et Loisirs [Dwelling and Leisure] and Le Corbusier’s (1887–1965) proclamation of housing and leisure as essential goods that should be guaranteed as public services, “an obligation of the community for all”. [2]

## 2. Establishment of “Holiday Village Russalka” operated by “Balkantourist” and part of the „Club Méditerranée“

Ironically, establishment of the Bulgarian state monopolist tour operator “Balkantourist” that later played a major role in Bulgarian touristic policy for development of international tourism was founded by the Communist government in 1948 as a self-sustaining enterprise of the Ministry of Railways in order to provide barter vacations for Czechoslovakian citizens as compensation for the nationalized Czech enterprises in Bulgaria.<sup>3</sup>[3]

Within a short time the mass tourism on the Black sea became a leading business sector in Bulgaria, attracting many tourists not only from the Czech Republic but also from the whole former Eastern bloc - Soviet Union, East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Romania and even tourists from West Germany. Gradually “Balkantourist”'s services expanded from predominantly seaside to include also mountain and cultural tourism. By launching the construction of the Bulgarian mega Black sea resorts in the mid 50-s – “Sunny beach” (1956-66) and “Golden sands” (1957-74), inspired by other countries such as Greece, Yugoslavia and Romania for development of own seaside resorts, the period of major international tourism in Bulgaria was initiated. [4]

Although founded as a part of the governmental programme for attracting foreign tourists in Bulgaria and operated by the state monopolist “Balkantourist”, the exclusive services of “Russalka” were not accessible for all but only for western tourists. Since its establishment in 1968 until 1990 Russalka Holiday village used to served exclusively foreign tourists, members of „Club Méditerranée“ – predominantly French, but later also Italian, Belgian, Spanish and Austrian tourists. Access to the holiday village was prohibited for Bulgarians, exceptions were made only for the resort personnel and administration.

In contrast to the tourist concept of the voluminous and also operated by the monopolist “Balkantourist” Bulgarian Black sea resorts “Druzhba”, “Golden Sands” and “Sunny Beach”, the small-scale, located in the wilderness “Russalka” followed the model of the headquartered in France all-inclusive vacation „Club Méditerranée“. Establishment of “Russalka holiday village” in 1968 pioneered about two decades the construction of resorts of the type “Duni” and “Elenite” in the mid-1980s. [5]

The innovative touristic agenda of “Russalka” which followed the model the French „Club Méditerranée“ vacation club provided all-inclusive packages. Besides food and accommodation the service package also included various ultimate entertainment and sport services and facilities, that in general the other Bulgarian mega resorts were deprived of: diving, riding and yachts clubs, tennis and children’s playgrounds, a shopping center, pelloid and mineral baths. The ancient and prehistoric rock-dwellings and wineries, as well as the Byzantine archeological remains in Yailata (Kamen briag) along with the natural underwater museum accessible by the divers contributed for the high quality of the provided cultural touristic product.

In fact, the first attempt of setting up a „Club Méditerranée“ in Bulgaria in 1966 within the “Sunny beach” resort failed. The secluded location of the present “Russalka holiday village” situated close to cape Kaliakra, North to Varna and respectively its airport, was carefully chosen by the French tourist managers as a result of investigating the whole length of the Bulgarian Black sea coastal line by helicopter. [6]

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<sup>3</sup> The idea for the favourable for Bulgaria cash-saving barter was suggested by the Czechoslovakian leader Klement Gottwald to the prime minister of the burdened with heavy war reparations Bulgaria Georgi Dimitrov and it included free vacation for his fellow citizens on the Black Sea in exchange for the nationalized by the communist authorities of the Czech industrial enterprises in Bulgaria. [3]

A team of Bulgarian architects, landscape architects and civil engineers prepared the master plan, the architectural, landscape and horticulture design of the holiday village under French guidance and counselling. The architecture team responsible for the architecture design and the masterplan was led by Marin Marinov and also included Simeon Dimitrov and Venelin Zhechev, Krastan Karakashev was responsible for the landscape design as well as the horticulture. [7]

Construction of “Russalka” started in the beginning of 1968 and lasted only several months as the resort was opened in the summer of the same year. “Russalka holiday village” became very popular in Europe, attracting annually between 6000-7000 foreign tourists during its long-season operation from May to October. Until today it stays quite unpopular on a national level among Bulgarians and is a favourite place for holiday due to the well preserved wilderness for tourists from Romania, Russia and Central Europe.

### **3. Modern sustainability approach and the concept of symbiotic architecture of “Russalka holiday village”**

“Russalka Holiday Village” pioneered establishment of the specific type of leisure architecture in Bulgaria and distinguished itself among the portfolio of the Bulgarian state monopolistic tour operator “Balkantourist” by its unique touristic and architectural agendas due to the involvement of „Club Méditerranée“.

Outstanding features of its architectural and landscape design are the implementation of innovative sustainable strategies such as the organic masterplan, acupuncture landscape and horticulture design long before they were commonly used in 21<sup>st</sup> century architecture.

The masterplan of “Russalka” follows organically the terrain and consists of sea-facing bungalows or villas of different types carefully grouped in mosaic volumes set within the existing forest frame in order to save as much as possible of the existing trees. For the same reason the sport facilities, the shopping centre and the panoramic-terrace restaurant are situated on the bare coastal cliffs.

The concept of symbiosis between architecture and nature of “Russalka Holiday village”’s masterplan and landscape design was preconditioned by the exclusiveness of its location within the Kaliakra natural reserve of steppe, cliff and marine habitats, the local mineral-spring and peloid resources. The secluded coastal spot of rather Mediterranean character features a cut rocky coastline, picturesque caves, small tucked away inlets and coves, limited fine golden sand and pebble stripes framed by a century-old oak forest alternated by abundant steppe vegetation. The wilderness of the Birds’ wharf on Via Pontica migration bird highway provides feeding, nesting and wintering of numerous waterfowls such as little bitterns, small loons, cormorants, hoopoes, thick-billed larks, black-backed wheatears, kingfisher, ducks, waders, gulls, etc., various steppe grass inhabitants and reptiles. [8]

Since nowadays natural reserves are prohibited for construction areas, the idea for situating a holiday village within a natural reserve is at least disputable from contemporary point. Construction of “Russalka” in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century addressed the claim for collective happiness and the right to holidays proclaimed by CIAM 5 in 1937 on the assumption that “the environment forms the individual”.

The design team tackled rather successfully the architectural and landscape design challenges concerning transformation of the natural reserve into a modern leiscapescape implementing innovative sustainable strategies providing for its guests literally fulfilled the modern paradigm for “direct contact with nature”.

The innovative landscape design of Krastan Karakashev implements afforestation of the bare seacoast and gentle for the existing wild verdure micro interventions such as

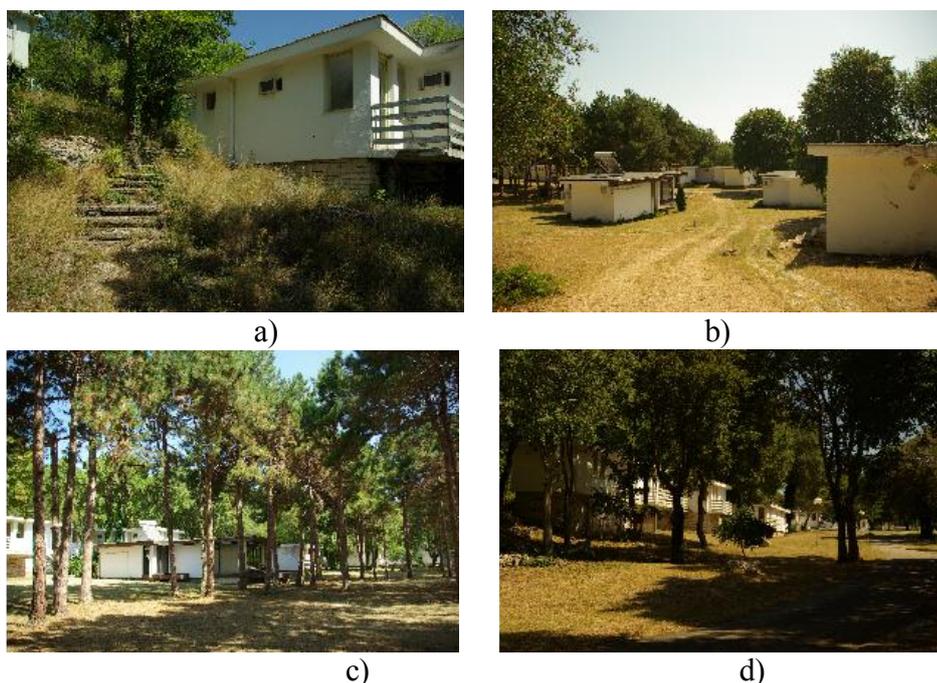
saving as much as possible of the existing wild verdure and oak forest and supplement of the removed trees with Mediterranean coniferous and deciduous species, preservation of the indigenous vegetation in both the micro-horticulture and macro-masterplan scale instead of designing the ubiquitous flower parterres, stepping-stones pedestrian promenades leading from the villas to the seashore and a breakwater protection of the central cove used by the yacht club.

The unique characteristic ring seashore terraces of “Russalka Holiday Village” were designed by Krastan Karakashev for enlarging the limited sand stripes and serve both as sand pools and micro swimming pools.

The original masterplan of “Russalka” includes measures as prohibited for motor vehicles resort area, a few main cobble-stone pedestrian and low-velocity vehicles alleys for maintenance and direct access from the lawn of the bungalows.

The modernistic urban and architectural agenda “Russalka holiday village” consists of 525 mainly one- and two- but maximum three-storey villas, each with own bathroom and provided accommodation of simple yet high level of comfort for about 1000 tourists.

The minimalistic, human scale architecture of “Russalka” villas features traditional materials such as white lime coating, wood and stone cladding and wooden banisters in combination with modernistic flat roofs. Repetitive modular design mimics the rocky terrain and interprets the terraced architectonics of the traditional settlements from the Bulgarian Revival period such as Veliko Tarnovo, Nessebar and Kovachevitsa in a modernistic way, providing panoramic view for each villa.



**Fig. 1.** The modular villas/bungalows of “Russalka” Holiday Village of various types are enclosed by an abundant verdure and forest frame a) b) c) d) © R. Kirova, 2019

The archeological remnants of a fortress’s wall were integrated in the panoramic seaside restaurant designed by Venelin Zhechev who intentionally incorporated the idea of a shipwreck on the cliffs in its design.

“Russalka”’s architectural appearance characterizes of the aesthetic of clarity and utility of the modern architecture but also features of contemporary sustainable strategies unusual for the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century such as maximal reversibility of the concrete

plots and structures, white lime coatings and light colour of the original flat roof coverages, adequate-orientated rooms protected by semi-opened terraces and verandas and big eaves for advanced sun protection and climatic sustainability.

Interesting comparison could be made with the modern architecture approaches in construction of “Golden sands” where the existing small swamp inhabited by water turtles was removed for the erection of the high-raise hotel “International” that was possible only due to the constant work of the water pumps installed in its basement.



a)



b)



c)



d)

**Fig. 2.**

- a) The seaside panorama restaurant “Russalka” designed by Venelin Zhechev © R. Kirova, 2019
- b) The virgin cliffy cape before its afforestation and construction of “Russalka”’s panoramic restaurant © Rashev, S., Die Bulgarische Schwarzmeerkuste, Sofia Press, 1968, p. 21 [9]
- c) The renovated villas of “Russalka” were added veranda appendixes © R. Kirova, 2019
- d) Part of the originally designed characteristic ring seashore terraces of “Russalka Holiday Village” were removed © R. Kirova, 2019

Finally, despite of the delicate and adequate design approach of “Russalka” still the local virgin ecosystem was negatively affected by its construction and rare protected species such as the ruddy shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*) and the monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) eventually became extinct.

#### **4. Preservation of “Russalka holiday village” as an outstanding piece of modern architecture heritage in Bulgaria**

Soon after the regime fall in 1989 “Balkantourist” has become a private enterprise and its property including “Russalka holiday village” was sold.

Owned by a private owner “Russalka” is managed today as less than 20% of the 522 villas of “Russalka” are renovated and function and enjoy touristic attention due to the unique virgin-nature environment.

Renovation of the situated close to the sea part of the holiday village includes enlargement of the villas by utilization of the verandas’ volumes and adding of new verandas, maintenance of the flat roof details, installation of roof solar water heaters, replacement of the existing decrepit furniture and replacement of the shabby wooden banisters of the verandas with metal railings.

Although left in deterioration with decrepit cladding and isolation details, the rest of the villas still keep the original interiors from the late 1960s.

After “Russalka” had become private enterprise it turned out that there were certain misses in its inherited from “Balkantourist” construction papers concerning part of the originally designed sea shore infrastructure which was difficult to stay concerning the profound changes in the eco-legislation.

Still, except from the partial removal of the originally designed characteristic ring seashore terraces and the central-cove pier of the yachts club together with the later constructed large beach swimming pool in 2010-11, in general the original masterplan is still intact. [7]

Regardless the alert need for overall conservation and overhaul of exterior and interior spaces, the acupunctural, wilderness-preserving landscape design and masterplan as well as the architectural authenticity of the oldest Bulgarian holiday village, the already half-century old “Russalka” demonstrates the highest degree of architectural authenticity and is the best preserved among the “Balkantourist” resorts today.

#### **4. Conclusion**

“Russalka Holiday Village” is an outstanding sample of modern architecture in Bulgaria which represents the successful yet adroit and acupunctural implementation of the bold and extraordinary idea for incorporating a resort into a natural reserve and the dextrous transformation of a wilderness into a modern leiscapescape.

Architectural and landscape agendas of “Russalka” are of outstanding value for Bulgarian modern architecture heritage as the oldest Bulgarian Black sea holiday village is undoubtedly a product of modern architecture and embodies its principle for “direct contact with nature” born on CIAM 5, but at the same time is a precursor of various contemporary sustainable approaches.

Regardless of or namely owing to the poor management of “Russalka” which embodies the modern credo from the era of leisure for “direct contact with nature”, its architectural, urban, and landscape authenticity are preserved to a practically utmost level.

Since in 2019 “Russalka holiday village” is expecting to change soon its owner, it is important the public attention for its preservation and conservation as valuable example of modern architecture in Bulgaria to arise: a balanced and ideologically devoided debate for the legacy of modern holiday architecture in Bulgaria from the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century,

a discussion about the preservation, maintenance and re-use of modern buildings and sites in accordance with a responsible evaluation of the landscape in environmental and sustainable terms.

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