

Architecture: Rumania's Ambitious Building Plan

Show of Photos and Models at Columbia

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ANYONE who wants some idea of what's building behind the Iron Curtain need travel only as far as Columbia University this summer, to see an exhibition called "Architecture in the Rumanian People's State."

The show of photographic enlargements and models, presented under State Department auspices as part of the cultural exchange program between the United States and Rumania, opens today in Low Memorial Library and will run through Aug. 16.

We cannot stress strongly enough that it's worth the trip. We pretend to no expertise in Soviet-satellite relationships or the system under which Rumanian post-war development has taken place. But architecture reveals, as nothing else does, the world that men make for themselves and the forces that shape that world. And the worlds of East and West are demonstrably different places.

Quite aside from its "best foot forward" tone and propaganda value, this exhibition is an instructive, edifying and completely fascinating document of much more than passing interest.

Rumania, a small country, presents that documentation in microcosm. In the state-run society the emphasis is on industry and housing, and with the switch from an agrarian to an industrial economy, one-third of the Rumanian population is now in urban centers like Bucharest, rebuilt and expanded towns like oil-rich Ploesti and picturesque Brasov and new communities like Onesti, where only one-quarter lived before the war. The country's 16 building regions are



Maimia, which has been built on the shore of Black Sea

controlled by the State Committee for Building, Architecture and Planning. All the construction in the show has been executed in the last decade; most within the last five or six years.

There is no doubt about the number of people who are better housed than previously and whose standard of living has been raised. No one can quarrel with the logic of planning that maps the needs of each community comprehensively, allocates funds and proceeds with phased building programs to meet those needs.

All 181 classifiable communities will have master plans by the end of this year. Each neighborhood unit is complete with shopping, educational and recreational facilities. Structural systems are being studied for efficiency and economy. Improvements and variety are being encouraged by competition. All this

is aided by some splendid topography that tempers the collective dream with a romantic setting.

The Rumanian building program is a notable achievement. Comparatively, we can only regret the results of non-planning in the United States: the confusion of free enterprise with anarchy, the ruthless rape of the land and the irretrievable loss of opportunities for environmental order and excellence.

The style of the Rumanian work, for anyone expecting Soviet pseudo-classicism or cozy Carpathian (there's some of each), is predominantly modern. But except for Maimia, the completely new seaside resort for 10,000 built in the last three years, which is strikingly up-to-date, most Rumanian building is slightly retardataire International Style dic-

Exhibition Is Part of Cultural Exchange

tated by standardized costs and construction.

Its most progressive aspect is its technology, particularly a fast, cheap, slip-form reinforced concrete system and industrialized prefabricated panel structures, far ahead of American housing methods.

But the Rumanian achievements are marred by depressing regimentation. Virtually identical five-story and 10-story apartment houses serve all cities. Individual homes can be built, but it's less expensive to buy state plans. Standardization of construction and design, rigidized by economics, enforced by building processes — "crane ideology" is a half-joke referring to the limitations set by this basic building tool — all contribute to a less-than-brilliant sameness.

It is easier to justify this uniformity in terms of critical social needs served in Rumania than to explain the equivalent less-than-brilliant sameness of American housing.

We regiment pretty effectively through the regulatory requirements of the Federal Housing Administration and the standard profit formulas of private builders. The bald truth is that Rumanian results are never worse than those of free enterprise. Mediocrity is independent of ideology—a kind of universal norm.

Rumania has the virtues of order and utility which, like good intentions, are admirable and necessary and often a bore. We have striking, virtuoso buildings executed in superb materials, finishes and detail, placed in settings of depressingly drab speculative chaos.

In planning, we're shamefully behind. But in Rumanian vs. American design, it's Mother Hubbard vs. Dior.