Socialist Networks and the Internationalization of Building Culture after 1945

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In 1968 the Parisian journal *Opus International* published on its cover an image of two mirrored supermen, differing only by the acronyms on their chest: that of the United States and that of the Soviet Union (fig. 1). Designed by the Polish artist Roman Cieślewicz, this poster, it has been noted, made the two powers appear as twins, accused them of exercising a destructive influence on the rest of the world, and suggested the impossibility, or futility, of choosing between them.¹

However, in another way, the use of an essentially American icon suggested a fundamental asymmetry, as if the only visual language in which the conflict could be expressed was provided by just one of its sides. As is well known, the claim about the symmetry between the US and the Soviet Union was part of the Cold War discourse,² and it helped the “superpowers” to discipline their populations and their allies, with, for example, the CIA’s *Handbook of Economic Statistics* consistently overestimating the size of the Soviet economy. Yet it was precisely the economy where the American preponderance was most evident. As economic historians have shown, Cold War rivalries were articulated within a global system of financial and commercial exchange by and large defined by the United States and the former colonial powers in Western Europe, to which the Soviet Union and its allies could hardly present a viable alternative.³

It is this entanglement of politics and economy that conditioned the work of architects, planners and engineers from socialist countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia—the topic of three papers in this issue of *ABE*. Rather than discussing singular events that seemingly confirmed the symmetrical images of the “Global Cold War,”⁴ the three authors look at longer engagements of architects and planners in what was at that time called the “Third World.” Christina Schwenkel studies the transformation of the city of Vinh in central Vietnam, to which architects from socialist countries contributed in two phases, during the wars of independence against France and the United States. Vladimir Kulić shows how a blueprint of a hotel, originally designed in the early 1970s for the Adriatic coast of socialist Yugoslavia, was built in Baghdad a decade later, to be operated by the Indian luxury chain Oberoi. Alicja Gzowska discusses the reconstruction, resto-
ration and conservation of buildings in North Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia by the Polish State Workshops for Conservation of Cultural Heritage (PKZ) from the 1960s until the end of the Cold War.

Together with a small, but growing, body of literature on the work of architects from socialist countries abroad, this issue contributes to the larger debate on the mobility of models, people, images, affects and norms in twentieth-century architecture, which the recent issues of *ABE* significantly advanced. The focus on socialist countries extends the discussion about the networks that facilitated the acceleration of this mobility after World War II, including colonial institutions and their postcolonial mutations; economic globalization; international organizations such as the UN, UNESCO, and the institutions of the emerging EU; professional organizations such as the UIA; as well as technical assistance programs of Israel and Scandinavian countries.  

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This issue shows that architects and planners from socialist countries were part of these transnational processes of architectural exchange, and demonstrates how the economic and political dynamics of the Cold War offered both opportunities and constraints to their practice abroad. In line with other studies of architectural transfers between the “Second” and the “Third” Worlds, these three essays make it clear that the Central European “satellites” were far from transmitters of Soviet orders, and that their partners in Africa and Asia were by no means “proxies” of the socialist bloc. This is not only because the “splits” between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia (1948) and People’s Republic of China (1960) left the socialist bloc divided and contributed to distinct flows of architectural transfers; but also because of the differentiation and heterogeneity of Soviet-dominated Central Europe. The shifts in Soviet policies were only one, among many, factors that influenced the dynamics of Central European architectural exports, which were often more dependent on internal events and bilateral treaties, and on the opportunities created by partners in Africa and Asia.

This heterogeneity is particularly evident in the varying architectural mobilities among Central European socialist countries that greatly differed in scales, speeds, modes of aggregation and rhythm patterns. No doubt the “family” of socialist countries in Central Europe was characterized by a resemblance of political and economic trajectories that, in architectural terms, resulted in shared debates on “national style” since the late nineteenth century, and on the role of architecture in nation building after World War I, tackling underdevelopment (with the particularly acute “rural question”), and state-led reconstruction and fast-track industrialization after World War II. Yet the responses to these shared challenges greatly differed, both within these countries and among them. Within the Soviet bloc, they often led to specializations that were recognized within the bloc (even if rarely coordinated within the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, CMEA) and resulted, for example, in the export of GDR prefab technology to Poland; the activities of Polish conservators in other socialist countries in Europe; or the advisory and design work of Yugoslav and Bulgarian architects on tourist architecture in the GDR. As the papers in this issue show, these specializations were projected and carried out abroad. However, the discourse about specific national competences, such as the “Polish school of conservation,” was often more of a branding attempt than a common denominator for a coherent body of expertise, and many of the specializations aimed less at a “socialist division of labor” aspired to by the CMEA, and more at a flexible identification of niches on the international market of services.

Given the scale of these projects and the breadth of their occurrences, what is most surprising is the speed with which the contributions of socialist countries to architectural production and, more generally, urbanization processes around the world, were forgotten after the end of the Cold War. This in spite of the familiarity with these projects in socialist countries, stemming from their circulation in the mass media and from an increasingly common experience of working abroad, shared by the urban,
professional workforce. A similar familiarity can be sensed when talking today to the older generation of architects and planners from Algeria, Libya, Syria or Iraq, who knew professionals from socialist countries from their cosmopolitan working environments, rather than as a parallel world of architectural transfers, “symmetrical” to those of the West. By contributing to the undoing of this forgetting, this issue of ABE challenges not only Cold War mirages, but also some more recent ones.

4 Odd Arne Westad, Global Cold War, op. cit. (note 2).
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