

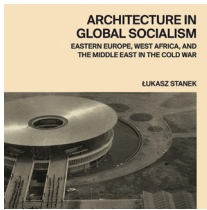
## Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, Western Africa and the Middle East in the Cold War

Lukasz Stanek, 2020

Hardcover, 368 pages

Princeton University Press

978 0691 168708



Most modern historical considerations of Africa, and to a lesser extent the Middle East, in architecture and elsewhere, are

presented in terms of the history of colonialism in these regions and their struggles to reject, modify, adapt or otherwise interpret its legacy. But the focus of *Architecture in Global Socialism* is on the rich exchange of ideas, people and methods between the design, construction and engineering communities of the Eastern Bloc countries and the nations of West Africa and the Middle East from the early 1960s to the late 1980s. And although “Cold War” is in

the subtitle, and the Soviet Union’s influence campaign certainly extended here, the main thread concerns the lesser-known interactions between Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and other socialist Eastern European states with newly-founded nations such as Ghana, Nigeria, Iraq, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates.

Some of these nations were only tangentially identified with “socialism”, but all saw an opportunity to profit and forge their own identities, by way of both commissions and barter of raw materials and goods, with nations that were not the dominant forces in the Cold War, and which had their own experiences on the ravages of colonialism. The effect on the built world in the Middle East and Africa was profound. In addition to dozens of master plans for Accra, Baghdad, Lagos, Abu Dhabi and Kuwait City, the legacy continues to be felt today, through interpretations of Socialist Brutalism into highly adaptive, vernacular works of tropical and desert Modernism.

More than 20 of the dozens of cited projects are notable tall buildings and structures, dwarfed in height by today’s giants, but redolent of the dynamism and optimism of the age. The Agostino Neto Monument of Luanda, Angola, was designed in 1979 not by a Portuguese firm, but by Soviet architects (it was completed in 2012). The Eko Hotel in Lagos (1977) was designed by Bulgarians, not Britons. Accra’s state house (1962) was co-designed by Ghanaian and Polish architects. Many more examples are scattered throughout the volume.

Although the book is deeply researched, its emphasis is more geopolitical than architectural at times, and the jargon more that of political, rather than architectural academia. Yet this intensive exploration of the phenomenon comes at an appropriate time, as new concerns mount about new proxy construction projects, “debt-trap diplomacy” and the like.

## Postmodern Architecture: Less is a Bore

Owen Hopkins, 2020

Hardcover, 224 pages

Phaidon Press

978-0714878126



For a style both celebrated and bemoaned for its excesses, it is remarkable that an overview volume of Postmodernism

practices such an economy of words, relying mostly on images to speak for themselves. Having said this, the commentary that is provided adds the necessary color and context, beyond the pastels, rhythmic stripes and smoked-gold sheen of the project photos. The introductory essay does due justice to Postmodernism, both as a reaction against the corseted dogma of Modernism

and as a celebration of nuance and ornament, with a hefty side helping of critique of both global capitalism and the self-seriousness of art and architecture.

Then there are the quotes, from a surprising range of professionals and professional commentators, including obvious choices (Michael Graves, Philip Johnson, Michel Foucault, Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi), as well as less-obvious ones (David Bowie, David Byrne, Harold Pinter, Andy Warhol, and Tony Wilson). A third category belongs to those practitioners whose position may not be as well-known. From Richard Rogers: “Postmodernism is the superficial aesthetic of shoddy commercial design, obsessed with money and fashion.” From Terry Farrell (perhaps less surprising that he is quoted than what he said): “The stylistic phenomenon that was briefly perceived in design and architecture in the 1980s, generally called ‘PoMo,’ was a

tangential blip; by no means could it be said to be the formal expression of, nor encapsulating the totality of, Postmodernism.”

In the end, these are of course, mere sprinklings of seasoning atop the main meal, which is a grand buffet of some 200 buildings, a cornucopia of commentary by way of their mere existence. Their inclusion or exclusion itself is occasion for comment: several of the 20 or so featured tall buildings are posted here, as we say in the 2020s, “without comment”: Petronas Towers, Kuala Lumpur, 1998, Cesar Pelli; Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, 1991, Kenzo Tange; Chung Tai Chan Monastery, 2001, C.Y. Lee; Umeda Sky Building, Osaka, 1993, Hiroshi Hara; Robot Building, Bangkok, 1986, Sumet Jumsai.