BUILDING EXPORT FROM SOCIALIST POLAND: ON THE TRACES OF A PHOTOGRAPH

By Łukasz Stanek

In February 1981, the main Polish architecture monthly *Architektura* [Architecture] dedicated an issue to "Polish architects in the World" [pic. 1]. While presentations of designs delivered by Polish architects abroad were not rare on the pages of *Architektura*, the dedication of a whole issue to this topic was unprecedented. With an economic crisis hitting the country, the editors returned to the pride of socialist Poland: the export of architecture and urbanism. Capitalizing on the post-war experience of the reconstruction of Warsaw, Gdańsk, and the construction of new towns such as Nowa Huta and Nowe Tychy, Polish architects and planners had been much in demand since the 1960s and their commisions included such key projects as the master-plans of Baghdad and Aleppo; administrative buildings in Kabul; museums in Nigeria; the trade fair in Accra and governmental buildings in Ghana; followed in the 1970's by large-scale research projects such as the General Housing Programme for Iraq and the regional plan and urban plans of the Tripolitania region in Libya.

Strikingly, none of these high-profile projects is featured on the cover of *Architektura.* Instead, the full-color image chosen by the editors was a rather surprising one: on the first plan one sees several palm trees; on the second something between a building side and a beach—a lot of sand in any case; and on the third, where one would expect the blue sky meeting the sea, one discerns an object with three white large chimneys which could be an ocean liner but is, more probably, an industrial facility.

How to make sense of this choice? Were the editors dreaming about a sunny cruise when preparing their February issue in the midst of Polish winter? Without discounting this option the cover also seems to convey something of the ambiguous atmosphere surrounding the work of Polish architects on foreign contracts. These contracts meant for them, not only the possibility of realizing projects, getting away from the grim reality of socialist Poland, but also the rare opportunity to travel and to earn significantly more than it was possible to back home. All this resulted in a combination of admiration and jealousy among their peers, and perhaps it is this marked irony that the cover of *Architektura* is referencing.

But what is it the building shown on this cover? *Architektura* is not of much help here, but a visit to the archives of the International Trade Fair in Poznań offers the answer to this question. After the Second World War this fair – which during the Second Republic (1918—1939) fashioned itself as a showcase for architectural experimentation – became one of the most important hubs for trade between enterprises from the socialist block. The journal *Polish Fair Magazine*, published in Polish, English, French, and Russian, features the building from *Architektura*. The 3rd issue of 1979 reproduces the facility in black and white and the shot makes it clear that the building does not stand in a jungle but rather on dunes covered with scarce vegetation [pic. 2]. The picture does not have a caption, but it was included in an article presenting Polish export projects in Libya—a country which since the revolution of 1969 and the proclamation of the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya in 1977, became one of the most important trade partners for Poland and several other countries in the Eastern Block. The text lists two neighborhoods in El Marj, constructed in the late 1960s near to the city of Barca, which had been destroyed in an earthquake; the text also mentions numerous infrastructural and engineering projects as well as services offered by various Polish firms. One of them was BUDIMEX, responsible for 600 houses, 1200 agricultural farms, 600 km of roads and two power plants in Libya, including an already completed one in Benghazi. It must be this power plant that made it to the cover of *Architektura*; which is confirmed by the caption in another issue of the Polish Fair Magazine (1/ 1981), where the building pops up again, now in full color, trimmed to a square format.

In the 3rd issue of the Magazine that same year the photograph reappeard again but now in an advertisement, not for BUDIMEX, but for another important agency of foreign trade – Energoexport – which, as the advert states, specializes in "power plants and industrial objects" built together with Western firms [pic. 3]. Advertisments like this, viewed from the perspective of the present, hint not only at the complex networks of dependency between state firms in socialist Poland, but also at their various pragmatic forms of cooperation with Western firms; this does not quite fit the picture painted by the dominant discourses in architectural historiography seeing the Cold War solely through the prism of the East-West competition.

The best account of the political economy behind the building in Benghazi can be found in the BUDIMEX files at the Archiwum Akt Nowych [New Files Archive] in Warsaw. Here, some of the Libyan counterparts of the Polish firms become visible; the documents show that the management of the company was under pressure to improve its performance on the international market. This was inscribed into a shift in the motivation for the export of architecture and urbanism by the Polish regime in the 1970's. Since the late 1950's the objectives had been predominantly geopolitical ones, feeding into the support of the processes of decolonization by the Khrushchev administration and stabilizing the post-war order in Europe; however, this changed in the next decade. With the recognition of the Polish borders by West Germany and with the necessity to pay off loans granted to the regime in Warsaw by Western financial institutions, the economic objectives started to prevail over the political ones. Yet while Polish technology became more and more outdated, it was labor—and intellectual labor in particular—which became a key export commodity for Poland. From a country of proletarians, socialist Poland was becoming a proletarian among countries, having not much to sell but labor.

If for the Polish regime the Benghazi power plant was, first of all, a commodity, it could have been also looked at with aesthetic gaze. In the archive of the Polish Architects Association (SARP) in Warsaw, among hundreds of dossiers of Polish architects, there are two that contain photographs of the power plant. These images, together with a set of schematic drawings of the plant and the administrative building, are to be found in the dossier of Wojciech Empacher, who claims in the accompanying CV to have designed the power plant in Benghazi together with his colleague K. Goliński. A different photograph of the Benghazi plant was included in the dossier of the architect Maciej Siennicki, who lists in his CV the "architectural design and the collaboration on the working design of a power plant in Benghazi" but he does not mention the names of his collaborators, as he is himself not mentioned in the dossier of Empacher.

The CV's of the two architects reveal that their paths crossed at the Warsaw state "architecture office BISTYP", and this explains the distribution of authorship for power plant. This office specialized in typical projects like industrial plants, but it also contributed to the most innovative architectures in the 1970's in Poland, such as the central railway station on Warsaw or the "Spodek" auditorium in Katowice.

Tracing references to BISTYP in journals specializing in building technology and construction allows one to add a new set of images of the Benghazi plant to the ones gathered so far. An article published in the journal *Przegląd Budowlany* [Building Review, 10/ 1976], which featured numerous articles by Polish engineers sharing their experiences of building in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, is illustrated by a photograph of sedimentation plants, and the article shows a black and white snapshot of the power plant as well, centered on its large volumes and three chimneys and surrounded by an array of technical equipment, vehicles, sheds, and vegetation. Yet the most complete account of the plant can be found in a paper from *Inżynieria i Budownictwo* [Engineering and construction, 15/ 1977] which includes an account of the site, the technological specification of all buildings and facilities, but also the organization of the building site and the terms of the contracts between all the firms involved, including West-German but also French, Dutch and British firms providing materials and equipment, as well as the Belgian supervisor. The article also gives an account of the most interesting technical solutions that were implemented, for example the sun-protective finishings on the roof and on the facades—all of them illustrated [pic. 5].

The photographs from the SARP archive are very different. Probably taken by the architect himself, the photographs in the Empacher dossier frame the abstract quality of some architectural details and the rhythms of the façade, in contrast to the complexity of pipes and conductors [pic. 6]. The images of the power plant Siennicki enclosed in his dossier—under a dramatic clouded sky, lit by a sharp light which emphasizes the volumes and the lines on the facades—are signed in an elegant typeface ("Power plant in Benghazi [Libya]. Façade of the main building") [pic. 7]. Both sets of images aim at persuading the viewer that the building is a piece of architecture: a claim which was instrumental to the objective of both architects submitting their work to the SARP in order to be granted the status of working "creatively", which came with specific tax benefits during socialism. Evidently, in order to make the argument about the creative labor of the architects, their photographs exclude any other types of labor involved in the process, including that of technicians and engineers, let alone that of the Polish and Libyan workers employed on the construction site.

Curiously, the very same photograph reappears in the promotional folder of the architectural firm Dona from the early 1990's. The gaudy folder, typical for the first wave of advertisements entering Poland after the end of socialism, shows a collage of designs delivered by the three partners Zbigniew Kargol, Janusz Przychodzki, and Wiesław Rzepka. The power plant in Benghazi appears here in the company of several projects in Nigeria, including embassies, university buildings, offices and industrial plants. This time the image is less the proof of an aesthetic achievement and more a demonstration of the capacity of the partners to control large-scale commissions in free market conditions, collaborate with Western firms, and use modern technology: a competence gained during the work on export contracts. ▲

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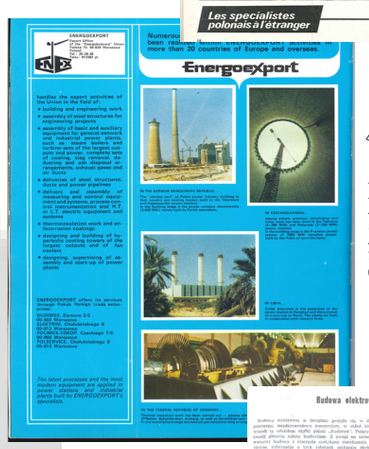
1.

Cover of Architektura 2, 1981, "Polscy architekci w świecie/ Polish Architects in the World"

2.

Magazine polonaise des foires 3 (54), 1979, p. 18. Archiwum Międzynarodowych Targów Poznańskich (Poznań)



3.

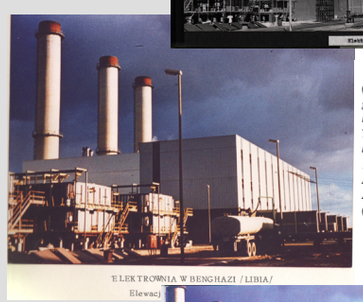
Polish Fair_Magazine 3 (62), 1981, p. 14, Archiwum Międzynarodowych Targów Poznańskich (Poznań)

4.

Magdalena Łabęda, "Budowa elektrowni Bengazi II w Libii" [The construction of the power plant Benghazi II in Libya], Inżynieria i budownictwo 15, 1977, p. 169

"Elektrownia w Bengazi (Libia)" [Power plant in Benghazi (Libya)], in dossier no. 387 (Empacher Wojciech), Archiwum Stowarzyszenia Architektów Polskich (Warszawa)

5.



"Elektrownia w Benghazi (Libia). Elewacja budynku głównego" [Power plant in Benghazi (Libya). The façade of the main building], in dossier no. 1254 (Siennicki Maciej), Archiwum Stowarzyszenia Architektów Polskich (Warszawa)

6.

7.

The Bengazi power plant in the promotional folder of "Dona LLC," Zbigniew Kargol, Janusz Przychodzki, and Wiesław Rzepka, early 1990's