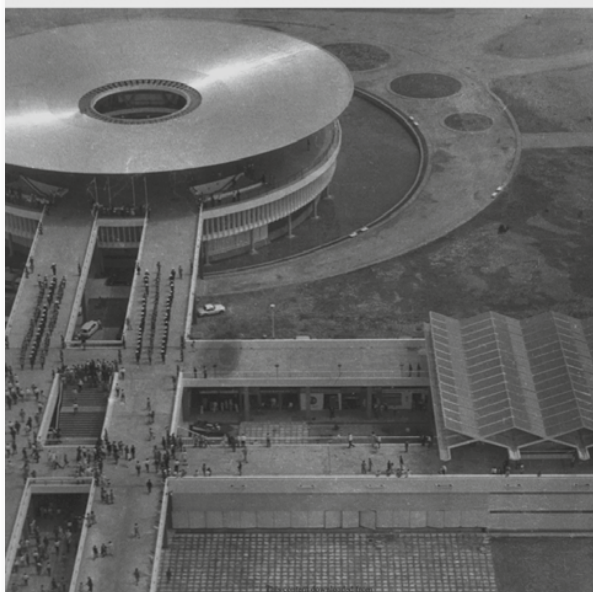


ARCHITECTURE IN GLOBAL SOCIALISM

EASTERN EUROPE, WEST AFRICA, AND
THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE COLD WAR

ŁUKASZ STANEK



ŁUKASZ STANEK

ARCHITECTURE IN
GLOBAL SOCIALISM
EASTERN EUROPE, WEST AFRICA,
AND THE MIDDLE EAST
IN THE COLD WAR

2020, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton
University Press, 368 p.

ISBN 978-0691168708

REWRITING THE HISTORY OF SHAPING LANDSCAPES IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: THE ROLE OF EASTERN EUROPEAN PROFESSIONALS

PREPÍSANIE DEJÍN
ŤAŽISKOVÝCH KRAJÍN
GLOBÁLNEHO JUHU: ROLA
VÝCHODOEURÓPSKYCH
EXPERTOV

Katarína Smatanová

As architects looking at a work of architecture, we often tend to focus on its form, visual esthetics, construction details, or the way the building communicates with its users or surroundings. What we cannot see are the influences lying behind the act of construction itself – the invisible processes and influences behind its every shape, the processes that formed the ideas and attitudes of its authors, economic and political impulses. UK-based Polish architectural historian Łukasz Stanek offers a great insight into the invisible factors that shaped the urban landscapes of West Africa and the Middle East, as well as Eastern Europe.

Even though his focus is on the Cold War era, the results still determine the construction sector in these countries even today.

Western colonising influences and their impacts on the development of architecture and urban planning are discussed very often, in academic theory or by practicing architects. However, Stanek's book relates different stories – stories of how Eastern European architects, designers, construction companies, research and technical knowledge institutions exchanged information and thus formed construction industries in Ghana, Nigeria, Iraq, the UAE and Kuwait. Stanek provides a

comparative perspective, identifying a common denominator of processes in five major cities: Accra, Lagos, Baghdad, Abu Dhabi, and Kuwait City, where case studies are provided reflecting the hidden stories of socialist architecture production of the 20th century.

In the framework of Cold War geopolitical rivalry, conflicts escalated between the decolonization movements and the forces of European imperialism. The Soviet Union was keen to distribute its foreign aid, and hence influence, among areas seeking decolonization. The states in the Non-Aligned Movement, i.e. the newly independent countries in Africa, and the Middle East wanting to escape persisting Western influence, were thus the well-prepared and well-positioned “recipients” of this aid.

However, this period and its developments have long remained blind spots in the practice of international urban and architectural history, forgotten by Western researchers almost up to now. As Stanek notes, “As a consequence of the reliance on Western archives, publications that discuss the work of foreign architects in Cold War Baghdad, for example, are limited to several years in the 1950s and later in the 1980s, while omitting the two decades in between, during which Iraq was allied with socialist countries.”

Yet all the same, these previous blind spots are full of vivid stories of cooperation, collaboration and exchange of ideas between experts from the “Second World”, involving as well Czechoslovakia and many of our senior professional colleagues, and the newly decolonizing area of the “Third World”:

Many leaders exploited this rivalry between the US and USSR, turning to socialist states for assistance in global foreign aid through the projects of modernization and new state building, or, often, housing provision.

The new modern housing, to be designed and built rapidly, required not only design and engineering professionals, but also importation of the whole segments of construction industry: not only architects but also contractors, design institutes, building systems and materials and machines, factories of concrete panels, design codes, urban standards. Stanek examines these processes through the case study of the Soviet prefabricated construction system exported to Accra, Ghana in 1960. Stanek thoroughly enumerates the adaptation of socialist development practices to tropical conditions. Similarly, Yugoslav and Bulgarian construction materials played a great role in

the development of Baghdad. Stanek additionally uses the Baghdad case to redefine the “World Socialist System”. Even though Iraq’s 1958 coup overthrew the pro-Western monarchy and the new Iraqi republic made claims of socialism, it nonetheless understood socialism in a different way than the faithful imitation of the Soviet system. For reasons of economics, politics and development, though, despite this conceptual split the USSR and Eastern European countries provided considerable military, construction, economic and technical collaboration to modern Iraqi nation-building throughout the 1960s. Rather than accepting at face value the “World Socialist System”, as then used by socialist authors to explore the dynamic relationships between USSR and African and Middle-East countries, Stanek shifts his attention to the process of exchanging labour and goods and extends it to a broader, and more thoroughly grounded, perspective.

The need for “assistance” was also strong in the field of knowledge. The building of new systems, massive housing provisions, or infrastructure development in newly founded states likewise required an increased number of national professionals in the field. Thus, the bartered “goods” also included architectural and engineering educational curricula, and while European or Soviet researchers focused on vernacular structures and housing adaptation to tropical climate. Stanek’s study of Lagos reveals how Polish and Hungarian planning methods and architectural vernacular traditions were granted a new life in Nigeria, along with the design standards of Abu Dhabi shaped by architects and professionals from Romania, or conversely the construction of Kuwait City by Eastern European labourers.

One of the main denominators of Stanek’s book are power relations. Using a geopolitical perspective, Stanek reveals the role of foreign trade organisations in shaping architecture (United Nations, US Aid and other institutions with their programs of technical assistance, and FTO on the other side). The highly visible results, whether built structures, educated practitioners, or codes and regulations, still continue to define development processes across many of these countries up to these days.

No less striking is the depiction of the paradoxical situation in relationships among professionals. As a Ghanaian architect recalls in the book’s introduction, for the first time, African architects and planners were managing

white men. “For him, and for many other Ghanaian professionals, the encounters with Eastern Europeans were part of the extraordinary moment of independence that entailed a disruption and fundamental reorganization of places assigned to Africans.” [2:4].

Besides the “big picture” of rewriting the stories of how 20th-century urban landscapes developed, Stanek has paid exceptional attention to all the scales of the studied projects, thoroughly examining all levels from the regional down to the architecture of individual structures, typology, or detailing. He finds parallels between the countries of origin of the architects from the East Bloc and the African countries, comparing European rural areas and the urban areas of West Africa, climate changes, and other stemming issues.

The book is extremely thoroughly researched and extensively documented, with a great and diverse array of illustration and graphic materials, including sketches, photographs, posters.

The results of Stanek’s work are exceptional, rewriting the view of the formation of modern architecture and planning in the Global South, reshaping the history of global urbanisation and drawing much-needed global attention to the role of the impact of Eastern European socialist professionals and their work, even if perhaps some further exploration of the roles, perspectives and views of local African and Middle Eastern architects themselves would be of benefit.

Indeed, the topic addressed by this book is not only important for the global history, but

even more vitally for practice within Eastern European today. The urgency of the impact of work from this often overlooked region was reflected also in a previous issue of the present journal¹ – exploring how Czechoslovak, or more generally Central European, architects exported (and simultaneously imported) the experiences of constructions and urban planning, with the aim of tracing back the influence of our unknown and forgotten practices in shaping other parts of the world.

Taking into account the large number of Central European professionals (many of them Slovak!) now working, in situ or from home, on massive construction projects in Dubai and the Middle East, Stanek’s work might shed a bit of the light also on the consequences of these works for the future.

Last but not least, the examination of urban, architectural and infrastructure projects through the lens of geopolitics and geoeconomics refreshes the methods of studying architectural history. Stanek reveals how economic institutions shaped the architecture and the development of architectural practices in the countries of the Global South, but also in the countries of the origin of the architects that were sent on these missions. It would be of great benefit to use these optics no less when looking at our contemporary practices. A perspective highlighting economics and politics when studying architecture may reveal the authenticity of the professionalism, and contribute to the discussions of the ethics and embedded (dependency) relationships of the current way of designing our environments.

¹ See also the thematic issue of *Architektúra & urbanizmus*, 2019, 53(3 – 4): ‘Export/import princípov plánovania moderného mesta’; which scrutinizes the exchange of architectural and urban planning principles between Central European architects/designers and countries of the developing world.

² STANEK, Łukasz, 2020. *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War*. Princeton University Press: Princeton and Oxford.