

Architecture in global socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle east in the Cold War

By Łukasz Stanek, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020, 368pp., £48 (hbk), ISBN 9780691168708

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BOOK REVIEW

Architecture in global socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War, by Łukasz Stanek, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020, 368 pp., £48 (hbk), ISBN 9780691168708

The view that space reflects and contributes to economic processes could have no better demonstration and extension than in Łukasz Stanek's latest book, *Architecture in Global Socialism*. A winner of both the Alice Davis Hitchcock Medallion by the SAH GB and the RIBA President's Award for History & Theory Research, 'the main dilemma of this book' is how to unravel 'the relationship between the studied architectures and the project of socialism' (p. 305). Is socialism a cultural thing? Did global socialism fail? Has Western capitalism been the sole driver of urban form in the Global South?

Classics in spatial political economy have tried to demonstrate the political-economic relationships that make up the city, but they typically prioritize geography, sociology, and economics, not architecture, the disciplinary base from which Łukasz Stanek addresses these questions. True to Marx's observation in the preface to the 1872 French Edition of *Capital*, Vol 1, (see republication in Marx, 1990, p. 104) that never has there been a 'royal road to science' for 'those readers who zealously seek the truth', Stanek read volumes in the archives of architects across the world for answers (pp. 308-317).

The resulting book is about architects from socialist Eastern Europe who travelled to and worked in the Global South. Stanek finds that these architects from Eastern Europe, where the book begins, demonstrated considerable diversity and agility. Their motivations for going to the Global South are often linked to cold war politics, but this book shows that there was far more to their *raison d'être*. Currency problems in Eastern Europe, the pursuit of professional excellence, the desire for a wider world view, and the possibilities to learn from elsewhere were, perhaps, even more important. Fundamentally, these architects considered that, as professionals who could offer much-needed solutions to shared problems of colonialism, underdevelopment, and peripherality, they were well-placed to become allies of decolonization.

From Accra and Lagos in West Africa during the first two decades of independence, to Baghdad, Abu Dhabi, and Kuwait in the Middle East, by the end of the Cold War, these architects co-produced post-independence urban development, along with Western and local actors. Their experiences were mostly sanctioned by socialist states, but they were also shaped by public institutions and private architectural firms in African and Asian countries which employed them. Many were not official socialists nor were they invited explicitly to develop socialist alternative urban development. Most of their hosts were members of the Non-Aligned Movement, a group of countries that claimed neutrality, neither socialist-leaning nor capitalist oriented. So their invitation of the Eastern European architects was not explicitly for socialist purposes.

Still, the architects skilfully used a number of strategies to distinguish themselves. For example, they proclaimed an alternative to commodified urbanism by practising 'gift diplomacy' (pp. 67-69) and facilitating petrobartering (pp. 224-230) 'or the exchange of goods and services for crude oil' (p. 226). These practices, echoing the principle of Southern 'mutual advantage' (p.226) also entailed localizing Eastern

European designs by taking into account contextual conditions (pp.242-243). Additionally, the architects pointed to their own experience of subjugation to show a sense of affinity with their new hosts. Where there were initial concerns about their experience, for example, with Africa (chapter 3) and Islam (chapters 4 and 5), the architects proved to be dynamic, rarely imposing imported solutions and, instead, seeking to support local processes.

The presence of Eastern European architects in Africa constituted conspicuous evidence of impact, but there were also many other markers. Supplies of construction materials from Eastern European markets, influence on legislation related to urban development, a burgeoning cadre of Eastern European educators teaching in architectural schools, and African and Middle Eastern professionals obtaining further education in Eastern Europe completed the picture. Eastern European teams of architects built social and professional architectural enterprises, many of which entered into partnerships with local architectural firms. Their presence led to the creation of industrial plants or factories that could supply the needed building materials for the designs they produced. Concurrently, these architects utilized economic concepts (e.g., petrobarter, p. 17) that would facilitate the relationships they tried to foster.

These arguments are contained in five interlinked chapters, starting with chapter 1, which sets the scene and closing with an epilogue which emphasizes the arguments. In between these, are chapters on Africa (2 and 3) and the Middle East (4 and 5) which illustrate Stanek's contentions and their nuances (e.g., the challenge for Eastern European architects to be sensitive to Islamic urbanism – see the Middle Eastern Chapters (4 and 5) and to the specificities of urban development in postcolonial Africa (see chapters 2 and 3).

The analysis in the book is clear enough, but there are a few cases of admixture that raise more questions than insights. Stanek seeks to show the work of the Romanians in a longer and broader perspective, so he projects Tripoli/Libyan experiences (e.g., pp. 227-230) when discussing urbanism in Baghdad. Stanek's comparative historiography justifies such about-face but, otherwise, the purpose of these mid-narrative switches is neither clear nor concise. In their place, he could have shed more light on reciprocal learning from African and Middle Eastern architecture. To be sure, in the book Stanek discusses how Africa influenced Eastern Europe, but the channels are limited: to those that could arise anywhere in the world, to remittances from the professionals, and to state oil obtained from the bartering, which drove suburbanization in Eastern Europe (pp. 303-304).

Stanek's contention is that, '[U]nlike Nkrumah and his collaborators in Ghana, Nigeria's political class felt no affinity with socialism' (p. 99). However, it is well-documented, for example, in *Kwame Nkrumah: Vision and Tragedy* (Rooney, 1988/2007/2015, pp. 26-27, 32-33, 77) that Nkrumah's socialism also had strong Nigerian roots, which are specifically traced to Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first post-independence president of Nigeria.


Although imprecise in some parts and admixing in others, Stanek's thesis – that Eastern European architects were both agile and versatile and that they co-produced postcolonial urban development in Africa and the Middle East – remains watertight, as are concepts such as socialist worldmaking. Overall, *Architecture in Global Socialism* provides much-needed cornerstones to advance spatial political economy.

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