

Reviews

Lukasz Stanek

“PRL™ Ekspert architektury i urbanistyki z Polski Ludowej / PRL™ Export Architecture and Urbanism from Socialist Poland”

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Lukasz Stanek (et al.)

Postmodernizm jest prawie w porządku. Polska archi-tekturna po socjalistycznej globalizacji / Postmodernism Is Almost All Right. Polish Architecture after Socialist Globalization.

Warsaw: Fundacja Bec-Zmiana. 2012. 94 pp. 48 b. & w. illus., 67 color illus., 11 axonometric drawings (ISBN: 978-83-62418-14-5).

One of the lesser-mentioned architectural and planning events that took place soon after World War II is related to the liberation of African and Near Eastern countries from colonial rule. These newly-formed countries found it necessary to transform themselves rapidly into independent, self-governing states and to make plans for new urban development, build representative structures for their governments and modern housing facilities for their citizens, and erect buildings to attract commerce and tourism. International organizations, such as the United Nations and UNESCO, planned and supported this work, but by the 1960s the newly-founded states began to make contracts also with state organizations, large private corporations, and even individual planners, architects, and engineers

for the design of, for instance, urban areas, housing complexes and government buildings.

As these new states were previously colonies of western countries, they often turned to countries from the socialist Eastern bloc, which were more sympathetic to the financial restrictions and basic needs (as well as the political orientation) of these newly-formed governments—although, as the new countries developed during the 1970s and 80s, some of them began to turn to the West for advice and aid. Poland's contribution to these countries began in the early 1960s with the winning of planning and architectural commissions that were the result of bilateral agreements between the Polish government through its agent, Polservice, in these third world countries.

Polservice, or PRL (People's Republic of Poland), which became the trademark title of this organization, was distinguished by its good reputation that was based, among other things, on the international appreciation of Polish urban planning, especially the post-war reconstruction of its cities—in particular, Warsaw—and on the cooperation of Polish architects and planners with such international organizations as the UN and the UIA. This reputation enabled Polservice to become a successful rival of Western companies and to develop several large-scale projects in third-world countries, such as the master plan of Baghdad, for which the planning firm of Miastoprojekt Kraków won an international tender in 1962, supplanting the previous plans for that city by the firms of Minoprio & Partners (1956) and of Doxiadis Associates (1958).

In addition to the major position of PRL, specialists in planning, architecture and construction had short-term contracts in these newly-founded countries as designers, teachers and consultants. The growing numbers of Polish architects who accepted work in these countries arrived because, in addition to their financial motivation, they felt a need to alter the conditions of their practice in Poland, where there were many limitations and failures in the realization of their projects. These new countries were often places where Polish architects were able to rethink their practice in the context of the international debate on architecture, which from the late 1960s was increasingly critical of 20s and 30s modern architecture. The relocation of architects and planners from 'second-world' countries to third-world countries gave them the opportunity to develop, exchange and mediate their knowledge and skills. Research on local and vernacular constructions familiarized these architects with different methods of approach to problems of climate, technology and local and cultural conditions. It also facilitated their adoption of local forms of building which would later be used in their own practice. The skillful combination of universal and local styles and modern and indigenous technologies played an increasingly important role in their postcolonial designs. Among the works illustrated in this publication are typical projects for schools and museums in Nigeria by Marian Łyczkowski (1970s), which demonstrate how knowledge of and empathy for existing local practice was introduced into the planning of modern spaces by Polish architects. However, in these post-colonial states, Polish architects and planners dealt

with more than problems of form and function—they often encountered difficulty in their attempts to introduce modern materials, methods of work and prefabrication into the different climates and economies of these areas. And by the late 1960s, as Polish specialists established methods for cooperation with local contractors and with other local specialists, the Third World countries which they served began to turn toward Western countries or joined the Non-Aligned Movement, and rivalry between the East and the West—between capitalism and communism—developed.

The question of what central European countries brought to African and near-Eastern countries, and what they took from them has received only scant attention to date. Hundreds of Polish architects and planners worked on these “third-world” projects, although the majority of that work has remained unpublished and unknown.

Lucasz Stanek is one of the few researchers to become involved in this interesting topic. Begun as a research project, titled “South of East-West,” that he initiated in 2009, during the years that he was affiliated with ETH (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule) in Zurich, he was able to locate the designs of projects for African and Near-Eastern countries produced by numerous Polish architects, planners and engineers who were in the Middle East and Africa during the Cold War. Much of the material that he unearthed, with the aid of assistants (archival research and interviews: Piotr Bujas, Alicja Gzowska, Aleksandra Kędziorek, Łukasz Stanek: analytical drawings: Michał Bartnicki, Maciej Bojarczuk, Tomasz Chmielewski, Dorota Flor, Michał Grzegorzczak, Tomasz Janko, Franek Ryczer, Filip Surowiecki, Agnieszka Szymczakiewicz), is located in family collections, the offices of architectural and planning firms, and in municipal archives. In his project, Stanek focuses on the topic of the export of architectural and urban planning concepts from socialist countries to post-colonial states in the Middle East and Africa during the Cold War by numerous Polish architects, plan-

ners, and engineers, who were active in these areas during the period from the 1960s to 1989.

The result of Stanek’s work, that includes material from state and private archives and interviews with many of the participating Polish architects, was first brought to the attention of the public in two exhibitions which Stanek organized in collaboration with the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art: *PRL™ Export Architecture and Urbanism from Socialist Poland* (October 15–November 15, 2010), which included 38 projects from eight African countries between 1967 and 1983; and *Postmodernism Is Almost All Right* (October 1–30, 2011), which included 62 designs of projects designed both during the time the planners and architects were in Africa, and 11 designs of projects that they created after their return to Poland. Each of these exhibitions has been followed by a bilingual Polish—English publication.

The 2010 Warsaw Exhibition Publication

Our knowledge of the 2010 exhibition is now partially recorded in material selected from it and published in 2011 as a special supplement to a bilingual issue of *Piktogram*, a Warsaw-based journal of contemporary art, that consists of plans, diagrams and photographs of 16 projects selected from the exhibition, with brief introductions to each project. A list of the entire 38 projects shown in the exhibition is located at the end of this material (pp. 52–53), and includes work designed by Polish architects and planners for governments and private companies in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Ghana, Nigeria, Algeria and the United Arab Emirates in the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s. These present the broadest possible range and variety of types, from individual buildings to regional plans.

The first, and most outstanding entry in the issue is the project for the 1967 Master Plan for Baghdad by the Miastoprojekt-Krakow team: the Miastoprojekt master plan, drawn up in two stages, includes both functionalist zoning and requirements for the preservation of monuments and historical sites. Despite

partial and sometimes inaccurate implementation, the plan indicates the main direction for urban development throughout the region, that began to be replaced only at the beginning of the 1980s by the postmodern proposals of such architects as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown, Ricardo Bofill, and Arthur Erickson. Other major entries include the Master Plan of Algiers (1970s), and the master plan for Zaria, Nigeria (1979), as well as urban planning projects and designs for public buildings that are included in the publication (an Olympic center, a trade fair, and museums) and are also of much interest.

This short publication, which is focused almost entirely on visual presentations, must be viewed only as an initial attempt to present a glimpse of the global transfer of architecture and knowledge from socialist Poland to the newly independent countries of Africa and the Near East, and conveys the heterogeneous and multidimensional nature of the built works. Reproductions of the Master Plan of Aleppo (1962), of new towns in metropolitan Damascus (1970s), of administrative buildings in Kabul, of the Trade Fair in Accra (1967), and of government buildings in Ghana, all highlight the contribution of Polish architects and planners to the developing of a new global idiom for modernist architecture and functional urbanism.

The introductory paragraph for each entry is short, including brief comments or citations from journals, publications and recent interviews with the architects, that were carried out by the researchers. The inclusion of these different voices, subjective opinions and retrospective assessments, highlights the complex structure of architectural practice during socialism. Tersely formulated and associative titles of the sections (“post-orientalism,” “everyday typologies,” “production of knowledge,” “modernization of memory”) define these new topics, that require further study.

The 2011 Warsaw Exhibition Publication

Stanek’s second exhibition, *Postmodernism is Almost All Right: Polish Architecture after*

Globalization (October 1–30, 2011), included 62 designs by Polish architects for third world countries as well as 11 designs for buildings in Poland, commissioned after their return. The publication that followed the exhibition, in which all of these projects are published, includes a preface, “Post modernism Is Almost all Right,” and short, heavily illustrated (with architectural photographs) essays on “Urbanity” and “Practice,” and an Introduction, “Buildings in Poland,” as well as two more brief essays: “Image” and “Discipline” at the end of the main section. There are also short comments and many illustrations for those projects that were designed for cities in Poland by Polish architects who had worked in Third World countries. These demonstrate the development by these architects of new architectural strategies. For example, the design for the Atrium office complex, one of the first office complexes in post-socialist Warsaw, is an attempt to create a recognizable urban space by referring to the volume, scale and details of the urban context that are a continuation of similar experiments made in Syria by the architects.

The architectural customs adopted by Polish architects during their work abroad were not the only channel of reception for postmodernism in Poland, but this experience is visible evidence of its impact, and this publication allows us to understand the role of professional architects and urban planners in the shaping of a new, capitalistic reality in central Europe after 1989. Contacts with Western investors and contractors and knowledge of advanced technologies and materials gained at foreign construction sites empowered architects such as Wojciech Jarzabek and Edward Lach to take advantage of new opportunities in Poland: their acquaintance with complex functional programs, such as shopping malls and office parks, in Kuwait and United Arab Emirates allowed them to gain commissions for some of the more spectacular department stores in the center of Wrocław.

This book is one of the first attempts to treat postmodern architecture in

Poland in a historical context, and thus it is relevant to today’s architectural practice and current urban designs produced by young architects. The many detailed axonometric drawings of the buildings published here were realized in Poland by architects returning from export contracts, or were made particularly for this book. They highlight the experience of these architects with third-world architecture to their contribution to the development of urbanization in post-socialist Poland.

The export of architecture and urban planning from western countries, such as the work of Walter Gropius and TAC, Jose Louis Sert, and Constantinos Doxiadis is far better recognized than that of these exports from eastern Europe, and has already achieved quite a rich literature, while the work of architects and planners from the socialist countries still remains unrecognized. Both these publications, with their presentation of archival material, demonstrate the importance and scale of this neglected phenomenon and add an important chapter to the history of the cross-fertilization that has taken place in a global architectural networks.

More information on these projects and publications can be found at www.south-of-eastwest.net

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Cold War Transfer: Architecture and Planning from Socialist Countries in the “Third World.”

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In 2012, to the two publications of material from the two exhibitions of designs by Polish architects and planners for Africa and the Near East was added the publication in an issue of the *RIBA Journal* of seven articles on the architectural and planning designs of seven central European countries (including the Soviet

Union) for Near Eastern countries. In this issue, the previous focus on the visual presentation of designs by Polish architects and planners was abandoned for a presentation of written, documented research on the collaboration of planning and architectural specialists from these seven countries with Third World countries, and includes the contributions of little-known central European professional agencies, firms, offices and individuals to Third World projects.

In his Introduction to the issue the editor, Łukasz Stanek describes the general topic of the issue. The articles that follow are very different in scope and content: the material is unknown by all but a few scholars, Because of this, and because of the significance of the content, brief summaries are given below for each of the articles.

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The author of the first article, Elke Beyer, is concerned with the development by Soviet planners working from Moscow in the 1960s of a master plan for Kabul, Afghanistan. She gives a perceptive, penetrating description of the complexities attending the planning, which seems to have been a composite of this Russian plan with a 1960 Master Plan by a French architect, sponsored by the UN, during the fragile period just after the end of World War II but before Afghanistan became the target of Russian ambitions. Political and economic developments would undermine the implementation of these plans, and almost nothing of them was achieved. The conflicts between Afghanistan traditions and Soviet practices in the implementation of housing designed by the Soviets for Kabul are described, as is the ability of Afghanistan to benefit from the “competitive coexistence” of both the French and Russian plans for the modernization of urban space and the designs for living quarters in this country, although only a few were realized before tensions with the Soviet government put an end to the projects.

The author notes that this period of cooperative planning was not limited to its effect (even if mainly theoretical) in Afghanistan. In addition to interchanges