
Review essay: Exchanging architecture and urban planning practices during the Cold War: between political ideology, architectural ambition, and economic opportunity[†]

In 1985 the German architecture critic and historian Udo Kultermann composed one of the first surveys of architecture in postwar Eastern Europe. The second chapter of that groundbreaking collection deals in particular with architecture production in Poland in the 20th century. In the short introduction to that chapter, which discusses some of the avant-garde realizations, Kultermann cites Polish designers' involvement in the conferences of the *Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne*, an association of architects and planners that was founded in 1928 and which assembled the world's most prominent architects of that time to discuss and spread the principles of the Modern Movement. Furthermore, Kultermann mentions Polish architects' employment at the office of the 'grand master' of modernism, Le Corbusier, and their appointment at American universities. The author thus conceptualizes the Polish architectural production of the interwar period as an offspring of the 'International Style'. However, Kultermann also highlights the contributions of Polish designers to international competitions and commissions after the Second World War, organized not only in Dublin, Paris, and Madrid, but also in more 'exotic' places such as Iraq, the Congo, and Syria. The author even catalogs these projects in a subchapter entitled "Polnische Architekten im Ausland" (1985, pages 119–120), emphasizing that Poland became an active player on the international architecture and urban planning scene after 1945. Although it is remarkable that Kultermann includes these projects in a discussion of Polish architecture as early as 1985, he does not elaborate on any of these realizations in countries beyond Europe, let alone their *raison d'être*.

Twenty-five years later, Łukasz Stanek finally addresses the work of Polish architects in the so-called 'Third World'⁽¹⁾ through the research, education, and exhibition project *South of East–West*, initiated in 2009. Through interviews and various kinds of archival research including historic documents, drawings, and photographs, Stanek maps the transfers of building and planning expertise between the 'Second World' and the Third World. Design became an increasingly global profession after the Second World War, with architecture and urban planning practices traveling extensively between the Northern and Southern hemispheres through development aid, imperialism, capitalism, geopolitical alliances, and other routes.

[†] A review of "**PRL™ export architecture and urbanism from socialist Poland**" by Łukasz Stanek, 2011 *Piktogram: Talking Pictures Magazine* 15 1–54

Postmodernism is Almost All Right: Polish Architecture after Socialist Globalization by Łukasz Stanek, 2012a (Fundacja Bec-Zmiana, Warsaw)

"Cold War transfer: architecture and planning from socialist countries in the 'Third World' " by Łukasz Stanek and Tom Avermaete, 2012 *The Journal of Architecture* 17(3) special issue

"Introduction: the 'Second World's' architecture and planning in the 'Third World' " by Łukasz Stanek, 2012b *The Journal of Architecture* 17(3) 299–307

⁽¹⁾After Stanek, I use the term to refer to the group of countries that remained nonaligned with either the USA, Western European nations, and their allies, or with the Communist Bloc. In contemporary debates the term 'Global South' has been adopted to overcome the pejorative connotations which have in time been associated with the term 'Third World'. For a more detailed study of this topic see Lee (2010).

In 2005 Eric Verdeil addressed some of the key issues in the debate about this topic through a mapping of the actors, organizations, networks, and mechanisms involved in the transfers of design practices after the Second World War, particularly between developing countries and the rest of the world. The work of Stanek contributes to this new domain by closely analyzing the means and mechanisms of the export of architecture, urbanism, and building technology from Poland (and by extension ‘socialist countries’) to Africa and the Middle East during the Cold War (see <http://www.south-of-eastwest.net>), thus critically repositioning traditional ‘center–periphery’ narratives (eg, Culot and Thievaud, 1992). Stanek explains these transfers of building and (urban) design practices by arguing that, for Poland, the export of knowledge and expertise was a valued tool to foster and underline geopolitical alliances with ‘developing countries’. Such countries, in the early years of the Cold War, became “important players in the confrontation between the socialist and the capitalist West” (Stanek, 2011, page 4). However, while the specificity of Stanek’s work lies in the focus on the architecture and urban design practices exported from Poland, the following question remains: how does the Polish case speak ‘beyond itself’?

In this review essay I show how the Polish case allows Stanek to develop more general arguments and issues that contribute fundamentally to our understanding of the transnational transfers of architecture and urban planning expertise to the Third World during the Cold War era. This will be argued through the discussion of three recent publications by Stanek “PRL™ export architecture and urbanism from socialist Poland” (2011), *Postmodernism is Almost All Right* (2012a), and “Cold War transfer” (Stanek and Avermaete 2012). It pays to read them together, for the approach and ambition of the first two is quite distinct from that of the third. In the first two publications, both reflections on exhibitions held in Poland, Stanek adopts a documentary approach, while experimenting with graphic design to make a point. The third publication, a theme issue of the renowned *Journal of Architecture*, further discusses the topics explored in the exhibitions, and in doing so demonstrates their broader methodological relevance.

PRL™, the first exhibition and publication of the same name resulting from the *South of East–West* project, presents an impressive overview of buildings and urban plans developed by Polish designers in developing countries. Generously illustrated, it displays a wide range of projects, from master plans and housing proposals to museums and exhibition pavilions in countries as far apart as Syria and Nigeria. The cover of the magazine shows a black and white photograph of a US Apache helicopter on which the title ‘PRL™’ is superimposed, printed in large, colorful letters cut out from the picture of a building (figure 1). The projects of Polish architects and planners in Iraq, Syria, Algeria, and Ghana, among others, are presented in the format of filing cards, with brief pieces of text, a large descriptive title, and several images and drawings of each project. The layout, in other words, is deliberately borrowed from advertisement culture. Emphasis is thus placed on the idea of Polish architecture and urban planning as an ‘export product’, as the subtitle “Export Architecture and Urbanism from Socialist Poland” makes explicit.

Hence, the layout and the title immediately reveal, in my opinion, the most crucial point of the publication: although the Polish export of architecture and urban design was ideologically motivated in its origins (hence the US Apache helicopter in the background of the cover), it was just as much a matter of economic pragmatism, professional ambition, and potential for architectural experimentation. This can be seen clearly in projects such as the master plans for Baghdad, developed by the Polish planning office *Miastoprojekt* in 1967 and 1973. The proposals are allegedly based on the mass housing and town planning experience that *Miastoprojekt* architects acquired through planning the ‘socialist new town’ of Nowa Huta in Poland. This experience made both the Polish designers and their client in Iraq confident that they could respond adequately to the needs of cities in Africa and the Middle East which required rapid modernization. Meanwhile, it is striking that the planning

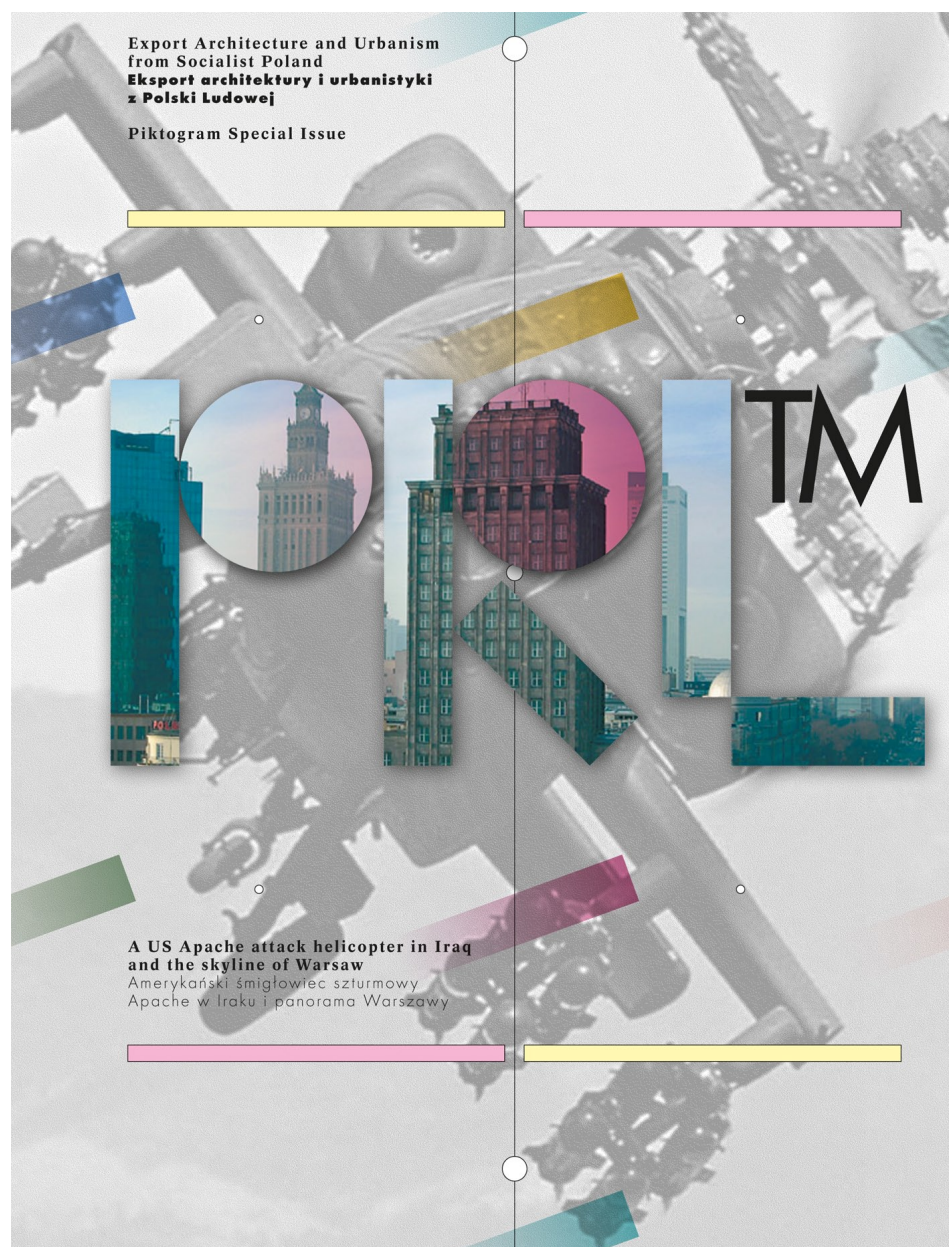


Figure 1. [In color online.] Cover of PRL™ (courtesy of Łukasz Stanek).

of Nowa Huta and the master plan for Baghdad could not be further apart in terms of the context or the ideology underlying the planning initiative. While the planning of Nowa Huta was politically motivated, centered on the creation of a large steel factory, planned ‘from scratch’, and in accordance with the architectural principles of socialist realism (Crowley, 1994; Stenning, 2000), the purpose of the master plan for Baghdad was to deal with rapid population growth and to improve the poor condition of urban infrastructure, including that of the historic central district. In other words, instead of referring directly to their experience with socialist (realist) architecture and planning, Polish planners mainly appealed to their experience in dealing with large urban environments, which included questions of infrastructure and preservation. Miastoprojekt’s careful analysis of traditional urban patterns in Baghdad, and the resulting proposition for dwellings adapted to both those patterns and the local climate substantiates this further.

Furthermore, Polish designers were by no means merely producing master plans, development schemes, and proposals for mass housing, as they had so often done in Poland. PRLTM also shows Polish designers' active involvement in projects with more 'representational power', such as museums, sports stadiums, exhibition pavilions, and universities. As Duanfang Lu (2011) has recently shown, such projects fed into the nation-building ambitions of many newly independent countries seeking to justify their power and claim a position on the world scene. Through their experience with the reconstruction of, for instance, Warsaw and Gdansk after the Second World War, Polish designers had certainly become acquainted with issues of national identity, memory, and history, which allowed them to refer to some of their own experiences when designing museums or exhibition pavilions in Africa and the Middle East. However, in terms of program, functionality, and partnerships, many of these prestigious commissions were new to Polish planners. Hence, just like the master planning of Baghdad, such projects provided designers with new architectural challenges and experiences. Moreover, the design and construction of these complexes was very lucrative, for both the architects and the Polish contractors. Paradoxically, it was the 'market-based' context in which architecture and urban planning was practiced in developing countries in the 1960s and 1970s that appealed to designers from socialist countries.

While Michelle Provoost (2006) has argued that the export of know-how from the Second World was driven by geopolitical ambitions, Stanek shows that it was also greatly motivated by architectural ambition and opportunities for professional and economic growth. More specifically, it offered opportunities for the government (which needed to repay foreign loans taken out by the communist politician Edward Gierek to fund domestic investments) as well as for architects and other professionals who no longer wanted to work within the boundaries of state socialism. At the drawing table in Africa or the Middle East, Polish designers were not so much selling socialist ideology through architecture and urban plans, as catering to the ambitions of the heads of state of newly independent countries, which allowed the designers to acquire new learning experiences as well as a new working territory. This pragmatism—as opposed to ideology—was exactly what new heads of state in developing countries were seeking in order to rapidly modernize their countries and put them on the world map. One of the architects interviewed by Stanek stated revealingly that “we were supposed to help socialist Ghana, but the trade counselor told us that they didn't need people for slogans but people who could get things done” (Stanisław Rymaszewski, cited in Stanek, 2011, page 44). Hence, while the title of Stanek's first publication naturally evokes the question of in what ways the production of Polish architects and planners in the Third World really was 'socialist' (d'Auria, 2013), Stanek's work can also be read as a plea to look 'beyond socialism' and consider it as a context or an occasion; a 'lens' which allows us to look more closely at such issues as the globalization of knowledge and urbanization.

After exploring the activities of Polish designers in developing countries, Stanek investigated the reverse impact of that experience on the architecture and urban design production back home in Poland in the early 1980s when socialism started losing ground. This is the theme of the exhibition (and catalog) “Postmodernism is Almost All Right” (PiAAR). As Stanek explains, Polish designers came in contact with architects, urban planners, and construction firms from around the world while working in newly independent countries. Through these encounters, he argues, Polish designers discovered the new paradigms which had arisen in architectural discourse in the USA in the 1970s, theorized with relentless enthusiasm by Charles Jencks as 'postmodernism' (eg, 1977). PiAAR then examines how the experiences of Polish designers and the architectural themes they picked up in Africa and the Middle East influenced their work back home from the 1980s onwards. Stanek's main ambition here is to trace part of the forgotten genealogy of postsocialist architecture in Poland back to the intense intellectual exchanges that took place from the 1960s in developing countries.

Thus, Stanek contributes to the architecture historiography of Poland of the last two decades by going beyond the traditional narrative of dependency between Polish architecture and the ‘centers’ of architectural culture in the West.

PiAAR, however, does more than contributing to the architectural historiography of Poland. Indeed, the designs of projects in Poland, which are juxtaposed (although not physically) with the projects developed by the same architects in Africa and the Middle East, are presented through the medium of axonometric projection, a type of line drawing that shows an object in a skewed direction in order to reveal multiple sides of the object in the same picture. This type of drawing dominates the publication, sometimes taking up two entire pages. According to Stanek, “the framing and the selection of detail [applied in the axonometric projections] stress the relationship between the building and urban space within the processes of urbanization in post-socialist Poland” (page 27). To illustrate how architects developed such a context-sensitive approach, Stanek classifies the projects in Africa and the Middle East into four categories: urbanity, image, discipline, and practice. The last two terms refer to the idea of architectural practice as a ‘production of images’ and designers’ sensitivity to the urban context in which they operated.

Examples such as the “neighborhood for elderly people” in Kuwait (Stanek, 2012a, pages 14 and 77), for instance, illustrate a design strategy of referring to the volume, scale, traditional patterns and symbols, and historical precedents of an old urban environment. Furthermore, projects such as the “conceptual design of a hotel for pilgrims” in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (figure 2, Stanek, 2012a, page 76), reveal research into rhythm, patterns, identifiable forms, and the creation of an urban landmark. If one then looks at the axonometric projections of buildings in Poland, in particular the “Centrum E housing estate” in Nowa Huta (Stanek, 2012a, page 41), one can indeed discern a sensitivity to the urban context (as well as to aspects of scale, volume, style, proportion, and traditional imagery) that was inspired by the experience of Polish designers in Africa and the Middle East.



Figure 2. [In color online.] Conceptual design of a hotel for pilgrims in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia by ARENCO and Włodzimierz Karczmarzyk, 1983 (courtesy of Łukasz Stanek).

The meaning Stanek thus assigns to the terms ‘urbanity’ and ‘image’ more or less corresponds with how architecture historians generally describe the phenomenon of ‘postmodernism’. William Curtis, for instance, wrote that from the 1970s “a new status was accorded to the architectural image and to the role of the symbol in the making of forms. ... the preoccupation with meaning ... prompted reflections upon the basis of architectural language, and upon the role of precedent in design” (1996, page 589). With this in mind, the reference in the title to postmodernism, as a late-20th-century tendency in the production of and thinking about architecture, seems quite evident. There is, however, reason to question the suggestion that Polish designers consciously acquired a ‘postmodern’ attitude toward design in developing countries which was then imported back to Poland.

First, the design strategies developed in Africa and the Middle East were not exclusively common to Polish realizations. Frampton’s (1999) *World Architecture 1900–2000*, for one, illustrates that the ‘vernacular’ approach to building, recognized in the neighborhood for elderly people in Kuwait, was quite common in the postwar era for architects working in traditional (urban) environments with hot climates. Recent research also shows how, for example, the French office of Kalt–Pouradier–Duteil–Vignal (KPDV), which designed buildings for Niger (figure 3), explored rhythm, form, patterns, representativity, and monumentality in the early 1970s just as ARENCO and Włodzimierz Karczmarzyk did in the conceptual design of the hotel for pilgrims in Saudi Arabia.⁽²⁾ It would therefore seem

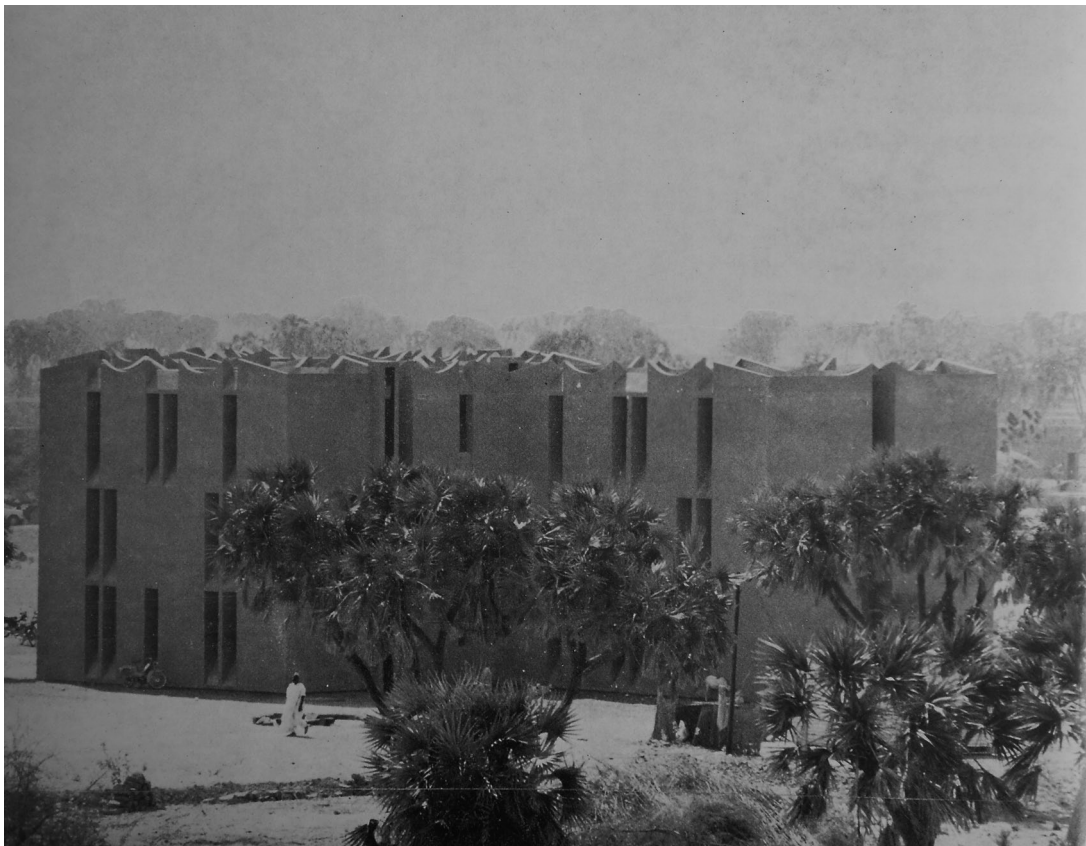


Figure 3. University of Niamey, Niger (1970–80) by the French architecture office Kalt–Pouradier–Duteil–Vignal (courtesy of Michel Kalt).

⁽²⁾ The research which I am myself conducting in the framework of my PhD at Ghent University deals with school buildings realized in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s through mechanisms of development aid. While mentioned by Maurice Culot and Jean-Marie Thievaud in their seminal book of 1992, KPDV’s work has not been thoroughly studied to date.

that the realizations of Polish architects can be placed within the broader context of an architecture production emerging roughly between the early 1960s and the late 1980s in developing countries, in which designers from very divergent backgrounds were involved. Clearly, many of them were confronted with similar questions and explored similar issues in response to the comparable contexts in which they were working.

I would argue, then, that it is the other two categories introduced by Stanek, ‘discipline’ and ‘practice’, which reframe our understanding of the ‘import–export’ of knowledge developed in the Third World. In the past, this has mainly been discussed in terms of colonial urban planning, conceptualizing the overseas territories as ‘laboratories’ for planning ideas to be implemented in the *métropole* (see, eg, Vacher, 1997; Wright, 1991). By introducing the terms ‘discipline’ and ‘practice’, however, Stanek argues that what Polish designers picked up in Africa and the Middle East was not a particular approach to planning or architecture, but new modes of production particular to the architecture scene of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

Firstly, the term ‘discipline’ is used to elaborate on issues such as architectural agency and autonomy, which were in many ways limited by authoritarian client regimes and an emerging market economy. Stanek cleverly includes grotesque projects such as the “design of a petroleum company office building in Abu Dhabi” (2012a, page 76), formally reflecting the identity of its client, and a generic design for an “office building in Dubai” (page 16), no doubt for an international company building corporate towers in every large city on the planet. Secondly, the term ‘practice’ is used to highlight the many new techniques, materials, methods, and programs Polish designers familiarized themselves with when working in Africa and the Middle East, such as air conditioning, structural innovations, new solutions for façades, green roofs, multifunctional urban complexes, commerce centers, computer-aided design, and even partnerships with large international construction companies. Stanek thus argues that Polish émigré architects were not seeking to reiterate or reinterpret the complex (often elitist) self-referential architectural discourses of postmodernism, focusing mainly on the formal qualities of buildings. Rather, they were surfing on the waves of the innovations and changing tendencies in architecture commissions with which they were confronted when working abroad.

It is somewhat regrettable that the medium of the axonometric projection, which forms the main communication instrument of the PiAAR exhibition, does not ‘stick’ to these two crucial aspects of the learning experience of Polish émigrés in the Third World. Meanwhile, it is most fascinating that the combination of the four concepts proposed by Stanek—urbanity, image, discipline, and practice—“do not add up to a unified design strategy, but rather identify tendencies in architectural culture since the 1970s” (Stanek, 2012a, page 8). In other words, what was picked up by Polish designers in Africa and the Middle East did not pertain to style or formal discourses, but to the new modes of production which were particular to the architecture scene of the 1970s. Stanek’s nod to postmodernism in the title now becomes apparent; just as Venturi (1966) once claimed that “Main Street is almost all right”, postmodernism is also “almost all right”.

What PRL™ and PiAAR show, in other words, is that what Polish designers realized in Africa and the Middle East was not an architecture somehow emanating socialist ideology; furthermore, what designers acquired through working abroad and brought back to Poland after socialism was not about style or formalism. Rather, the essence of their activity was based on a kind of pragmatism, with economic opportunities and architectural experiences defining how they operated. In “Cold War transfer”, a theme issue of *The Journal of Architecture*, Stanek thematizes this perspective as a new historiographic approach, thus demonstrating the broader relevance of the story of Polish exports ‘beyond the Polish case’.

Here, Stanek again argues that the ‘ideological lens’ with which researchers have looked at the export of expertise during the Cold War era does not allow us to grasp entirely what was realized—nor the mechanisms through which it was realized—by architects and urban planners in developing countries. The different contributions to the theme issue indeed demonstrate that there were also new collaborations and unexpected results from the foreign resources that were entering Third World countries during the Cold War—hence the first subheading “competition and collaboration” of the introduction to the theme issue (Stanek, 2012b, page 300). Besides designers from socialist countries picking up new ideas in an environment where a myriad of nationalities were operating (often through development aid or the booming oil industry), there were also African and Middle Eastern heads of state who became skillful negotiators of aid from the different ‘Blocs’ as they went about pursuing a particular national form of socialism or capitalism on their own terms.

Furthermore, the theme issue argues for a perspective which shifts from individual practitioners operating as ‘global consultants’ (see, eg, Avermaete, 2010; d’Auria, 2010) to “networks and aggregates”—the second subheading in Stanek’s introduction to the theme issue (Stanek, 2012b, page 301). One of the main arguments is that such an approach more accurately reflects the operational mechanisms in the production of architecture and urban design specific to the division of labor in the postsocialist world. The focus of all the contributions to the journal is therefore on “how state institutions from Socialist Europe established, stabilized, maintained, reproduced and expanded networks within which people, projects, money and ideas circulated” (Stanek, 2012b, page 301). The importance of ‘aggregate actors’ in the production of architecture and urban designs is indeed what makes the case of socialist export architecture so interesting and unique, apart from any stylistic particularities of Polish design. In effect, as has been suggested recently in a theme issue on Africa of *OASE* entitled “L’Afrique, c’est chic” (Lagae and Avermaete, 2010), it is becoming essential to recognize the myriad of new actors, mechanisms, and networks arising after decolonization in order to understand the increasingly global architecture production emerging after the Second World War.

I would argue, therefore, that the interest and broader relevance of studying the case of Polish export architecture and urbanism lies in two things. Besides the inherent value of its contribution to the ‘canon’ of architecture historiography by taking the work of Polish architects out of its ‘double periphery’ (that of the Second World as well as that of the Third World), the broader significance of Stanek’s work can hardly be overestimated. By focusing his analysis of the mechanisms of knowledge transfer during the Cold War era on the specific case of architecture and urban planning, Stanek is able to unravel all the factors affecting the exchange of (human) capital during a period that was dominated by geopolitical conditions. It allows him to reveal how, within that exceptional (and in a way restrictive) climate, both institutional and individual actors played a role in the export–import of knowledge, cutting across geopolitical boundaries and pursuing ambitions beyond pure ideology. The exploration of this topic has in turn allowed Stanek to make a strong case for a new methodological approach to architectural realizations in the postwar era—when ideas traveled across boundaries with a remarkable fluency—within the much broader context of political and economic realities, institutional actors, and entire knowledge networks.

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