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An Image and Its Performance: Techno-Export from Socialist Poland

In February 1981, the main Polish architecture journal *Architektura* dedicated an issue to “Polish Architects in the World”¹ (fig. 1). While the presentation of designs delivered abroad by Polish architects was not rare on the pages of *Architektura*, the dedication of an entire issue to this topic was unprecedented. The export of technical expertise, including architecture and planning, was the pride of socialist Poland. Capitalizing on postwar reconstruction, state-led urbanization, fast-track modernization and longer traditions of Central European architecture, Polish architects, planners, engineers and construction companies had been much in demand during the Cold War. They have been designing structures for Africa and Asia since the 1960s, including governmental buildings, social facilities and housing in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Algeria, Nigeria and Ghana, as well as highly visible projects such as the master plan of Baghdad (1967, 1973), the General Housing Program for Iraq (1976–1980), and the master planning of the Tripolitania region in Libya (1979–1983).²

Strikingly, none of these high-profile projects is featured on the February 1981 cover of *Architektura*. Instead, the full-color image chosen by the editors was an enigmatic one: in the foreground one sees several palm trees; in the midground, something between a construction site and a beach – a lot of sand in any case; and in the background, where one would expect the blue sky to meet the sea, one discerns an object with three large white chimneys, which could be an ocean liner but a second glance confirms that it is, sadly, an industrial facility.

At first, this image appears as a mere curiosity; but it keeps popping up in various archives, including those of trade institutions, professional organizations and the government. These scattered images can be read as points on the networks of architectural mobilities from socialist Poland and, in this way, encounters with these images allow for a reconstruction of the networks in which they were circulated. The most striking feature of such encounters may be their serendipity, stemming from the compartmentalization of archives according to institutional categories, their fragmentation, insufficient cataloging and – often in post-socialist Poland – their incompleteness. This is why, in this article, passages between networks will be reconstructed on the basis of a previous identification of the image in question by means of a broad scanning of the archives. The archival metadata reveals how images were recruited to assume then consolidate networks of specific communities of practice (architects, engineers, administrators, managers of state-socialist companies) and to demonstrate the competence of those identified with these images. Sometimes they were planted to link various communities; at other times, these communities used specific images precisely in order to block such connections. In this sense, in what follows I will discuss networks of architectural mobilities not only in terms of associations but also in terms of gatekeeping protocols and entrance conditions.³

Images of Foreign Trade

The cover image from *Architektura* was not accompanied in the journal by any caption or credit, and employees at the journal recall neither the photographer nor the building shown. A visit to the archives of the International Trade Fair in Poznań proves to be more helpful. Founded in 1911 when Poznań was part of the German Empire, after the Second World War the Fair became an important hub for international trade in the socialist bloc: a meeting place for enterprises from socialist East and capitalist West but also from the post-independence South: Ghana, Nigeria, Egypt, Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq and Iran. Beginning in 1955, Polish industry was represented at the Fair by foreign trade organizations (FTO) – that is to say, institutions that processed all the foreign-trade contracts of Polish transactors during socialism. Created in the wake of the war, their first role had been to purchase technical equipment from abroad that was necessary for the state-led reconstruction of the country and for the program of rapid industrialization. But then, in order to generate convertible currency needed for import, the FTOs were given the task of exporting Polish products and services. These included the services of architects, engineers and planners, mediated since 1961 by the FTO Polservice. Polservice was present every year at the Trade Fair in Poznań: first hosted



fig. 1 Cover of *Architektura* 2, 1981, “Polscy architekci w świecie/ Polish Architects in the World”.



fig. 2 *Magazine polonaise des foires* 3 (54), 1979, p. 18. Archiwum Międzynarodowych Targów Poznańskich (Poznań)

in a temporary, round pavilion,⁴ it moved during the 1970s to the pavilion of Budimex, a construction firm authorized to work abroad, until it relocated to its own modest pavilion. The Polservice pavilion was often shown in the organization’s advertisements in *Polish Fair Magazine*, the official journal of the Trade Fair, published in Polish, English, French and Russian.⁵

It is in an article about Budimex planted in *Polish Fair Magazine* that the building from the *Architektura* cover reappears.⁶ A 1979 issue of the Trade

Fair journal 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 with scarce vegetation (fig. 2). The picture does not have a specific caption, but was included in an article presenting Polish export projects in Libya. The accompanying text in French lists several of them – neighborhoods in Barca (El Marj), agricultural farms, roads, a power plant in Benghazi with a water-treatment plant – and announces the construction of more farms, a power plant in Homs, and an extension to the plant in Benghazi.⁷ It must be the latter that made it to the cover of *Architektura*; this is confirmed by a caption in another issue of *Polish Fair Magazine*, where the building pops up again, now in full color, trimmed to a square format.⁸

Socialist Poland had been present on the Libyan market since the country's independence (1951), and this included the participation of Polish architects and planners in numerous UN missions, such as the program of self-help housing in Tripolitania.⁹ After the coup of 1969, followed by the proclamation of the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya in 1977, Libya became one of the most important trade partners for Poland and other European socialist countries.¹⁰ The commercial involvement of Polish firms since the 1960s included the design and construction of roads, geological and cartographic surveys, fishing ports and irrigation infrastructure, but also preservation projects for historic urban centers.¹¹ The Warsaw Development Consortium (Wadeco) delivered the planning of the sewage system in Tripoli, geodesic surveys in Misratha and Sirte, and a factory for prefabricated housing elements in Tripoli.¹² By the late 1970s, Wadeco was commissioned to produce the regional plan and urban plans for the Tripolitania region, an area in which 60 percent of the population and two-thirds of the economic activity of Libya was concentrated. At the peak of fieldwork and planning activities, more than two hundred Polish planners and forty geodesists worked on site, sent by universities, research institutes and planning offices throughout Poland.¹³ Architects were on board too, and their portfolios show various strategies for dealing with the cultural context of North Africa, from housing typologies that allowed outdoor sleeping – as at the Zanzour estate in Tripoli (1977) designed by Edward Wysocki at the service of Libya's National Housing Corporation – to Jan Wran'a's opulent interpretation of an imagined Arab city in ornamental facades for department stores and tourist facilities in Misratha during the following decade.¹⁴

The collaborative character of these projects and the ability of Polish firms to collaborate with foreign contractors comes to the fore in another appearance of the Benghazi plant photograph in *Polish Trade Fair Magazine*, now in an advertisement for the state enterprise Energoexport, which as the

sented to the Polish public as a means of stabilizing the international standing of the country, notably in the UN, in particular before West Germany's recognition of Polish borders in 1970 within Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik. Economic interests were a crucial motivation too, and they became more pressing with the necessity of repaying loans granted to the regime in Warsaw by Western financial institutions in the course of the 1970s.¹⁶

As a result, Libya, along with Iraq, became Poland's most important trading partners because neither country required the underwriting of contracts by the Polish government and both agreed to barter transactions. These transactions were accompanied by a discourse about a shared political commitment on the parts of both countries "to support national freedom movements and revolutionary forces in Africa," as the Libyan newspaper *Al-Fajr Al-Jadid* reported in 1978 on the occasion of Muammar Gaddafi's visit to Poland.¹⁷ Along similar lines, an author writing in *As-Sadaka*, the journal of the Society of Polish-Libyan Friendship, after listing all Polish projects in Libya including the Benghazi power plant, concluded that "there is nothing odd about the fact that in Libya the Poles are called 'Libyans of the North.'"¹⁸ The Polish regime, meanwhile, presented the engagements in Libya to the home public as "aid" granted to "a young country on the path toward socialism."¹⁹ Yet such statements contrast with pressure put on Budimex by the government to improve its economic performance,²⁰ especially in view of the fact that its projects in Libya, including the power station in Benghazi, ended up in the red.²¹

Picturing Professionalism

Whether a commodity or a gift, the Benghazi power plant was for the Polish regime, first of all, a question of political economy. Yet it could also have been looked at with an aesthetic gaze, as proof of the architectural competence of its designers. In the archive of the Polish Architects Association (SARP) in Warsaw, among hundreds of dossiers of architects, there are two that contain photographs of the power plant. During the postwar period, SARP was a mediator in the international activities of Polish architects, which included the dissemination of briefs for international competitions, assistance in the submission of entries, and negotiations on behalf of its members with various authorities. In the SARP archive, the dossier of Wojciech Empacher – who claimed in the accompanying CV to have designed the power plant in Benghazi with a colleague, K. Goliński – contains photographs of the power plant and a set of schematic drawings of the technical facilities and administrative building.²² A different photograph of the Benghazi plant is included in the dossier of the architect Maciej Siennicki, who listed in his CV the "architectural design and the collaboration on the draft design of a power plant in



fig. 4 Magdalena Łabęda, “Budowa elektrowni Benghazi II w Libii” [The construction of the power plant Benghazi II in Libya], *Inżynieria i budownictwo* 15, 1977, p. 169.

Benghazi,” but did not mention the names of his collaborators, just as he had not been mentioned in the Empacher dossier.²³

The determination of authorship in export projects is not an easy task, because of their specific labor conditions. Architects were working in large teams in which they were often assigned to highly specialized jobs, frequently shifting from one project to another. They had little control over the commissions and were often called back to Poland before the project was finished, or even before technical drawings were delivered. Empacher and Siennicki must have been members of such a big team, and their CVs in the SARP archive show that their paths crossed at the Warsaw state planning office Bistyp [Office for Studies and Type Projects of Industrial Constructions]. Since its creation in 1951, Bistyp belonged to the most innovative architectural and engineering offices in Poland, and besides type projects was responsible for many singular, highly visible buildings based on experimental engineering solutions such as the modernist “Supersam” supermarket (1962) and the central railway station (1975), both in Warsaw, the Spodek auditorium in Katowice (1971) and the Oliva sports hall in Gdańsk (1970). Since the 1950s, Bistyp had specialized in building export, including that of industrial facilities, and a publication celebrating thirty-five years of its existence lists, among numerous other projects, the power plant in Benghazi.²⁴

Mapping references to Bistyp in journals specializing in building technology and construction permits a new set of images of the Benghazi plant to be added to the images gathered so far. One of these was included in an article published in the professional journal *Przegląd Budowlany* [*Building Review*], which featured numerous reports by Polish engineers sharing their experiences of building in Africa and Asia. The article was illustrated by a black-and-white snapshot of the power plant, centered on its large volumes and the three chimneys, surrounded by an array of technical equipment, vehicles, sheds and vegetation.²⁵ The most complete account of the plant for a professional audience interested in the nitty-gritty of export contracts, though, can be found in a paper from *Inżynieria i budownictwo* [*Engineering and Construction*], which included an account of the site, technological specification of all buildings and facilities, organization details of the building site and terms of contract between all firms involved.²⁶ This paper also accounted for technical solutions employed – the sun-protective finishing of roof and facades, for example – and reproduced their photographs (fig. 4).

The images from the SARP archive are very different. Probably taken by the architect, the photographs in the Empacher dossier emphasize the abstract quality of architectural details and rhythms of the facade (fig. 5). The images from Siennicki's dossier show the power plant under a dramatically cloudy sky, lit by sharp light emphasizing the volumes and lines of the facades, and are labeled in an elegant typeface ("Power plant in Benghazi [Libya]. Facade of the main building") (fig. 6). The shots are similar to those of other projects abroad included by Siennicki in his dossier, in particular the Polish Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan. By means of these images, architects were aiming to persuade their SARP peers to see the depicted building as a piece of architecture and then to grant its designers the status of "architect-creator" that came with specific tax benefits in the era of socialism. In order to make the argument about the creative labor of architects and their authorship, their photographs omitted suggestions about other types of labor involved in the process, such as that of technicians and engineers, let alone that of Libyan and Polish workers employed at the construction sites.

Selective Visibility

When the editors of *Architektura* chose the cover image for their issue on export projects, no similar attempt was made to present the Benghazi plant as a piece of architecture. Browsing that issue of the journal might suggest that something else was at stake here. The issue was the last in a series offering an overview of Polish architectural culture in preparation for the International Union of Architects (UIA) congress in Warsaw in June 1981, just



fig. 5 “Elektrownia w Benghazi (Libia)” [Power plant in Benghazi (Libya)], in dossier no. 387 (Empacher Wojciech), Archiwum Stowarzyszenia Architektów Polskich (Warszawa).



fig. 6 “Elektrownia w Benghazi (Libia). Elewacja budynku głównego” [Power plant in Benghazi (Libya). The facade of the main building], in dossier no. 1254 (Siennicki Maciej), Archiwum Stowarzyszenia Architektów Polskich (Warszawa).

months before martial law was declared by the regime in December 1981.²⁷ In an atmosphere highly critical of modern architecture, the UIA congress proposed the “Warsaw Charter,” which was a programmatic critique of the Athens Charter.²⁸

In that climate of opinion, the cover of *Architektura* appears as a product of “double-coding,” theorized by Charles Jencks – a prominent visitor to Warsaw in 1981 – as an essentially postmodern operation.²⁹ While for the

general public the cover image presented an industrial facility in an exotic location, the architectural community may have read it as an ironic commentary about labor conditions on export contracts. Working in Africa and the Middle East was clearly a desired professional experience for Polish architects: it gave them an opportunity to realize ambitious projects beyond the precarious conditions at home of “real existing modernism” dominated by state bureaucracy and the building industry.³⁰ Export contracts offered them a rare opportunity for travel, which entailed trips to Libyan beaches but also to the origins of their discipline: the Roman cities of Leptis Magna and Sabratha, and Italian colonial architecture surveyed by several Warsawians during their stays in Tripolitania.³¹ Yet for many architects, the most important reason to leave home for export contracts was financial, since these allowed earning much more than was possible in Poland. This atmosphere, combined with an often-unwarranted suspicion of political compromises allegedly being required from those applying for a passport, contributed to the fact the architects were not very eager to highlight such projects in their portfolios back in Poland. In light of this, what appears on the cover of *Architektura* to be an omission of architecture in favor of a piece of infrastructure reflected the highly ambiguous atmosphere around export projects.

This ambiguity was not restricted to the architectural community, but concerned the public at large. From the late 1960s, civic architecture and housing projects abroad designed by Polish architects and built by Polish firms became less and less visible both in the general mass media and in the professional press. Reasons for this omission might be found in a 1964 review published in a literary journal, “Export of Polish Architecture,” in which the author contrasted the success of Polish architects in international competitions with the disappointing architecture “on the internal market.”³² The contrast stemmed, he argued, from “stingy building norms,” “strict investment discipline,” “general economic tendency towards lowering the standards and decreasing the quality of buildings,” and “typization and standardization which [...] result in a range of identical or very similar buildings, streets and whole neighborhoods.”³³ Had *Architektura* chosen a more appealing cover, it might have provoked similarly uncomfortable questions about architectural production in Poland, even more pressing in the contexts of the economic crisis of the early 1980s than they had been two decades before.

While images found in an advertising brochure, a trade journal, an engineering journal, or a dossier in SARP seemed to have been put out there to perform a specific task in a circumscribed community of practice, the image from *Architektura* is ambiguous in its message, instrumentality and audience. Read in the context of late socialist Poland, *Architektura*'s cover could be a

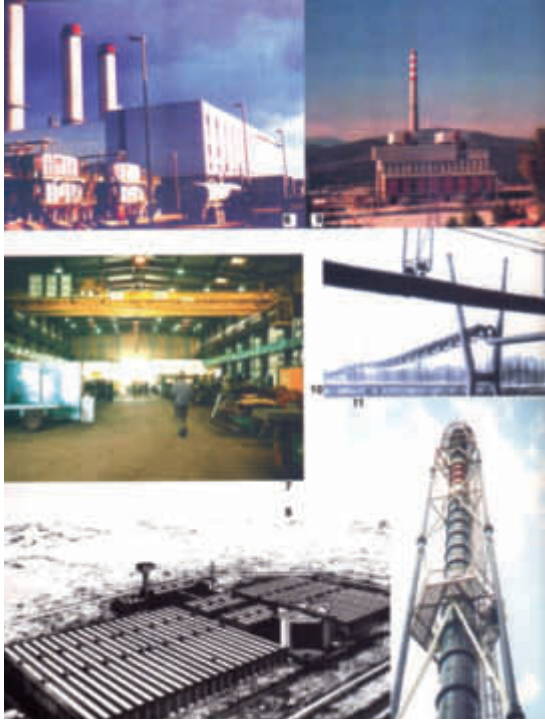


fig. 7 The Bengazi power plant in the promotional folder of “Dona LLC,” Zbigniew Kargol, Janusz Przychodzki, and Wiesław Rzepka, early 1990s.

celebration of export projects or their critique; an expression of complacency, a witty commentary or a conformist omission.

It was only after the end of socialism in Poland that the image of Benghazi’s power plant was once again recruited to persuade and to connect. The photograph from Siennicki’s SARP dossier was shown in the promotional leaflet of the architectural firm Dona, one of many burgeoning private architectural offices in the early 1990s³⁴ (fig. 7). In this folder, the partners of the firm, who did not appear in any other context discussed before,³⁵ showcase the power plant in juxtaposition with their projects in Nigeria from the previous two decades, including embassies, university buildings, offices and industrial plants. In this way, the African experience was shown to prospective clients as a demonstration of the capacity of the partners to secure large-scale commissions in a competitive market, to collaborate with Western firms and to apply cutting-edge technology. The images were reproduced in full color, to make the most of the variety of materials, textures and forms employed in these projects – a variety that fed into the embracing of postmodernist sensitivities by investors and the broader public in post-socialist Poland. The assimilation of such sensitivities was yet another lesson that had been learned from the export contracts.³⁶

Endnotes

This paper expands my text published in ANZA, 1 (Dar es Salaam, 2011), 22–23. I would like to thank Sławomir Gzell, Waław Piziorski, Wiesław Rzepka and Bogdan Wyporek for granting me access to their private archives; Piotr Bujas, Alicja Gzowska and Aleksandra Kędziołek for assisting me with parts of the archival query for this research; and Razan Francis and Senna Al-Bachari for helping me with the translation of the Arabic materials.

- 1 *Architektura*, 2 (1981).
- 2 See Łukasz Stanek, “PRL™ Export Architecture and Urbanism from Socialist Poland,” *Piktogram: Talking Pictures Magazine*, 15 (2011), 1–54; Łukasz Stanek, “Miastoprojekt Goes Abroad: Transfer of Architectural Labor from Socialist Poland to Iraq (1958–1989),” *The Journal of Architecture*, 17:3 (2012), 361–386; Łukasz Stanek, “Mobilities of Architecture in the Global Cold War: From Socialist Poland to Kuwait and Back,” *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, 4:2 (2015), 365–398; Łukasz Stanek, “Architects from Socialist Countries in Ghana (1957–1967): Modern Architecture and Mondialisation,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 74:4 (2015), 416–442. For a bibliography of the architectural mobilities in the networks of socialist countries and of the Non-Aligned Movement, see Łukasz Stanek, “The ‘Second World’ Architecture and Planning in the ‘Third World,’” *The Journal of Architecture*, 17:3 (2012), 299–307; Łukasz Stanek, “Socialist Networks and the Internationalization of Building Culture after 1945,” *ABE Journal*, 6 (2014), <http://abe.revues.org/1266>, accessed January 14, 2016.
- 3 Stanek, “Architects from Socialist Countries in Ghana.”
- 4 The designers were the architect Andrzej Bołtuć and the artists M. Raducki and A. Strumiłło; SARP archive (Warsaw), dossier 154 (Andrzej Bołtuć).
- 5 *Poznan Fair Magazine*, 1 (1985), 16.
- 6 *Magazine polonaise des foires*, 54 (1979), 18. Archiwum Międzynarodowych Targów Poznańskich (Poznań).
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Polish Fair Magazine*, 60 (1981), 20. Archiwum Międzynarodowych Targów Poznańskich (Poznań).
- 9 *Fundamenty*, 132 (1959). Polish planners contributed also to the “Great Man-made River” project in Libya. See Bohdan Wyporek, *Daleko od Warszawy: architektka zapiski z trzech kontynentów* (Warsaw: Akapit, 2009).
- 10 For bibliography, see Aboulgasem Ahmed Gsuda, *Libia w piśmiennictwie polskim po II wojnie światowej* (Warsaw: Dialog, 2003).
- 11 *Rynki Zagraniczne*, 105 (1975), 24 (1979), 93 (1980), 138 (1989).
- 12 *Rynki Zagraniczne*, 138 (1989).
- 13 Polservice Consulting Office et al., “Tarabulus Agglomeration: An Outline of Physical Dvelopment–2000. Final Report” (Warsaw: Wadeco, 1982), Waław Piziorski Archive, Warsaw.
- 14 SARP Archive (Warsaw), dossier 573 (Edward Wysocki); Jan Wrana Archive, Kraków.
- 15 Małgorzata Łabęda, “Budowa elektrowni Benghazi II w Libii,” *Inżynieria i Budownictwo*, 5 (1977), 169–173.

- 16 See Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); David Engerman, "The Second World's Third World," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 12:1 (2011), 183–211.
- 17 *Al-Fajr Al-Jadid*, July 2/1821 (1978).
- 18 Tadeusz Mrzygłód, "Gospodarka Libii i jej powiązania z Polską," *As-Sadaka: Miesięcznik kulturalno-społeczny: Organ Towarzystwa Przyjaźni Libijsko-Arabsko-Polskiej*, 1 (1981), 23.
- 19 Filmoteka Narodowa (Warsaw): "Polskie spotkania z Libią" (F. 2804), "Budimex w Libii" (F. 2912, 1977), "El Marj. Stara i nowa Barka" (F. 2941, 1977), "Budimex–export wewnętrzny" (F. 2899); see also newsreels from the same archive: KR6 b/69, KR 49 A/69, KR 45 A/76.
- 20 Archiwum Akt Nowych (Warsaw), "Centrala Handlu Zagranicznego Budownictwa BUDIMEX w Warszawie," zesp. 2350, 1967–1983.
- 21 Andrzej Warmiński, "Dolary wyrzucone... w piasek," *Fundamenty* 48 (1981), 1, 4.
- 22 SARP Archive (Warsaw), dossier 387 (Wojciech Empacher).
- 23 SARP Archive (Warsaw), dossier 1254 (Maciej Siennicki).
- 24 *BISTYP: 35 lat działalności, 1951–1986* (Warsaw: Bistyp, 1988).
- 25 Borys Zawadzki, "Eksport polskiej myśli technicznej," *Przegląd Budowlany* 10 (1976), 454–458.
- 26 Łabęda, "Budowa elektrowni Benghazi II w Libii."
- 27 *Architektura*, 35:3–4 (1981); "XIV kongres UIA Varšava 1981," *Arhitektura urbanizam*, 20 (1981), 8–30. See also *L'Union internationale des architectes, 1948–1998* (Paris: Epure, 1998).
- 28 Alexi Ferster Marmot, "Urbanism in Warsaw: Solidarity and Beyond," *Places*, 1:2 (1983), 78–81; Marmot, "The Warsaw Charter," *Places*, 1:2 (1983), 82–83.
- 29 Charles Jencks, *The Story of Post-Modernism: Five Decades of the Ironic, Iconic and Critical in Architecture* (London: Wiley, 2011).
- 30 Łukasz Stanek, ed., *Team 10 East: Revisionist Architecture in Real Existing Modernism* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art / Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Łukasz Stanek, *Postmodernism Is Almost All Right: Polish Architecture after Socialist Globalization* (Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc-Zmiana, 2012).
- 31 Sławomir Gzell Archive (Warsaw); Comp.: Giuliano Gresleri, Pier Giorgio Massaretti, Stefano Zagnoni, *Architettura italiana d'oltremare: 1870–1940* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1993).
- 32 Jan Paweł Gawlik, "Eksport polskiej architektury," *Życie Literackie*, November 22, (1964), 1.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 "Przedsiębiorstwo Inwestycyjno-Handlowe Dona Sp. z o. o.," advertising leaflet. Wiesław Rzepka Archive (Warsaw).
- 35 The three partners were Zbigniew Kargol, Janusz Przychodzki and Wiesław Rzepka. Wiesław Rzepka Archive (Warsaw).
- 36 Stanek, *Postmodernism Is Almost All Right*.