

BOOK REVIEW

## The Worlding of Architectural Labor

### *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War.*

By Łukasz Stanek. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. 368.  
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The effort to imagine worlds beyond colonialism has become a central subject for recent historiography, and in this enormously important contribution from Łukasz Stanek, the post-colonial imagination enfolds the architectural labor of experts from the Comecon states who worked in West Africa and the Middle East from 1957 to 1990. Stanek's long and detailed project is timely, not least as a counter to the dominance of architectural research conducted in Western European and Anglophone archives. Stanek has gathered project files from the dispersed personal and institutional archives of former socialist architectural bureaus and companies, and conducted site-based research, often with African academics. His remarkably persistent research — some details of it are given in a concluding note on sources (308) — has unearthed an extraordinary record, often in the form of long unseen plans, photographs, and publicity. Read as manifestations of new worldmaking during the intense growth period of Africa's 'short century'<sup>1</sup> and the Middle East's early growth decades, these designs emerged from urban modernization, decolonial agendas, and foreign collaborations.

After proposing to address both the histories and significance of these 'new geographies of collaboration' and hinting at projects in Syria, Ethiopia, and Algeria that fall outside this volume, Stanek limits his case studies to four main sites and periods: Ghana during 1957–66, Lagos during 1966–79, Baghdad during 1958–90, and Abu Dhabi and Kuwait City during 1979–90. These are places where some major projects designed for the new regimes were built, including international trade fair infrastructures, the complex built in Lagos to host the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (Festac '77), and government buildings for Abu Dhabi. In parallel, socialist consultants also contributed to several master plans or 'type designs' (215–22) of standardized building layouts or components. These commissions led to incremental growth in the exchange of expertise as socialist architects worked abroad, sometimes with African assistants, and occasionally beneath Middle Eastern experts. Sometimes, however, they suffered problems of coordination, unsustainable costs, and, in some later cases, outdated design approaches. The projects Stanek describes were often produced through collective ventures, including state-funded design institutes. This approach to procurement contrasted with the colonial practices of foreign architecture where research stations would offer expertise to professional offices and construction firms, a likely more flexible way of distributing knowledge, but a less efficient route to scaling up construction.

<sup>1</sup>O. Enwezor (ed.), *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994* (London, 2001).

While there are some extraordinary narratives of grand projects carried out by Comecon experts, the stories of those overseas experts who became more embedded in local societies by joining local institutions make for some of the most revealing content. These stories point to the significance of longer periods of work in creating proximity and empathy. Take, for example, how in 1964, in Ghana, the Giprostoiindustriia — the Soviet design institute for constructing industrial buildings — set up a prefabrication factory to construct a northern extension to Accra that would house 20,000 people (73–85). The modified versions of Russian prefabricated housing, the so-called I-464 layouts, allowed cross ventilation in line with tropical architecture principles but had to be adapted again when the Ghanaian clients demanded higher ceilings. Yet as the revised scheme was concluded, Kwame Nkrumah was deposed in a coup, and the project came to nothing. In contrast, the Hungarian architect, Charles Pólonyi, who arrived in Ghana to take a post at GNCC (Ghana National Construction Corporation) — the nationalised state public works entity — distanced himself from political regimes back home by resigning to take up a post in the new architecture department at what is today the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi (110–13). In this space, Pólonyi developed an experimental approach to settlement design that was sensitive to indigenous skills and materials, and imagined development as an incremental process that would, in time, erase rural and urban divides.

While the role of local planners and architects in these collaborations is less developed in Stanek's narrative, there are welcome glimpses of figures such as Vic Adegbite, the Ghanaian head of the GNCC who was hosted on a study tour in the USSR in 1963. In Kuwait, Akram Ogaily, the Iraqi architect heading the cosmopolitan Archicentre, hired his former professor, Vaclav Bašta, for the new architecture department at the University of Baghdad in 1962. By considering these continuities and affiliations, as well as the fascinating, hybrid projects that followed, Stanek shows that the imaginary work of anticolonial change went well beyond rhetoric and political maneuvering. Despite the failures that were consequences of incommensurate expectations — the ceiling height in the Accra flats — Stanek is astute in explaining how under 'the conditions of the Cold War, new geographic connections and new claims about affinities, however inchoate and speculative, became opportunities for juxtaposing cities that had never been juxtaposed before' (47). Such exchanges grew mutual capacities to imagine roles for architecture that were not solely instruments of colonization. In this respect, architectural labor runs parallel to the work of other mobile cultural actors — for instance, events taking place in the FESTAC complex, as collated by *Chimurenga* magazine (2019), or in film, as Basia Cummings has outlined (2012).<sup>2</sup>

But decolonization can also be an academic act. Stanek's section on the work of Zbigniew Dmochowski, the Polish emigré architect and scholar who produced the comprehensive survey of Nigerian vernacular architecture over three decades (130–44), notes that even drawing is political. In this respect, Stanek's project itself can be seen as a labor of decolonization, and the most radical and comprehensive in the handful of recent histories that enfold construction into histories of Africa.<sup>3</sup> His work uses and exceeds documentary rigor in order to exorcise tired themes in urban history and geography — colonial planning, monotony in housing and monuments, or the lack of local agency — in favor of a more complex story. Anchored by the labor of building, and seen as a gift to young scholars on the continent, *Architecture in Global Socialism* is an extraordinary armature that opens a space for developments to come.

<sup>2</sup>Chimurenga, *Festac '77*, (Cape Town, 2019); B. Cummings, 'Soviet cinema and African filmmaking', in *Africa Is a Country*, 20 Apr. 2012, <https://africasacountry.com/2012/04/soviet-cinema-and-african-filmmaking>.

<sup>3</sup>D. Morton, *Age of Concrete: Housing and the Shape of Aspiration in the Capital of Mozambique* (Athens, OH, 2019); M. Herz and I. Baan, *African Modernism: The Architecture of Independence in Ghana, Senegal, Côte D'ivoire, Kenya, Zambia* (Zurich, 2015); H. Judin, *Architecture, State Modernism and Cultural Nationalism in the Apartheid Capital* (London, 2021); A. Levin, *Architecture and Development: Israeli Construction in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Settler Colonial Imagination, 1958-1973* (Durham, NC, 2022).