

Socialist Architecture and Planning as Global Expertise

Journal of Urban History

1–7

© The Author(s) 2022

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissionsjournals.sagepub.com/home/juh

Elidor Mëhilli (2017). *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, xvi + 329 pp., \$39.95 (hardback).

Łukasz Stanek (2020). *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 368 pp., \$60 (hardback).

Vladimir Kulić, ed. (2019). *Second World Postmodernisms: Architecture and Society under Late Socialism*. London: Bloomsbury, xii + 254 pp., \$102 (hardback).

Reviewed by: Juliana Maxim, *University of San Diego, San Diego, CA, USA*

DOI: 10.1177/00961442211069930

Keywords

socialism, Albania, postmodernism, internationalism, architecture

These three books illustrate the ambition and methodological sophistication that writings on socialist architecture have acquired in the last decade. In *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, Mëhilli writes in depth about Europe's smallest socialist state, while Łukasz Stanek and Vladimir Kulić, along with thirteen other contributors, cover expansive new geographies of socialism that stretch well beyond the usual and by now well-trodden East Berlin—Moscow axis, to include Accra and Baghdad, Havana and Kyoto.

All three books present significant new content and perspectives: Mëhilli gives us the first book-length English history of urban planning during the first two decades of Albania's communist regime; Stanek breaks open the conventional contours of the socialist camp during the Cold War by tracing the deep connections that existed between the Eastern European states and various postcolonial nations; while Kulić and others take up the underresearched and undertheorized architectural practices of the last decades of socialism. All three books reveal that socialism in the second half of the twentieth century was a porous geopolitical category defined through a host of international alliances and collaborations that were continuously and fiercely negotiated by a multitude of competing agents. All three books trace in vivid detail how such internationalist agendas took shape or faltered on the ground, and paint a portrait of socialism that is altogether more complex, vivid, experimental, and surprising than we were accustomed to expect. All three are terrific teaching tools that will allow anyone to vigorously reconfigure a survey course with examples from contexts as diverse as Nigeria, Cuba, Iraq, and Estonia.

The authors' own backgrounds reveal how the architectural history of socialism has matured and expanded by developing a contemporary version of the networks of exchange, circulation, and collaboration that the books set out to illustrate. Most of the authors here combine European and U.S. educations and intellectual traditions and work at once in highly specific national professional contexts and in international scholarly circuits; many of the scholars writing here about people and ideas crossing borders are immigrants themselves. As a result, these books tell stories

of interconnectedness and global reach in more ways than one, not only through their luminous contents but also by embodying the kind of circuits of knowledge required to deprovincialize our understanding of the architecture and urban forms of the second half of the twentieth century.

In his engaging book on Albania, Mëhilli shows how a country long understood as a paragon of isolationism was in fact engaged in multiple and far-reaching efforts of exchange and connection, first within the Soviet Bloc, and, in the 1960s, after the Sino-Soviet split, with China and beyond, and how, even in the Albanian microcosm, one finds the echoes of a sprawling and dynamic socialist world. Mëhilli draws a picture of a small but plucky nation determined against all odds to forge its own socialist path, under the rule of a Party of Labor whose young, inexperienced, and often uneducated members nonetheless understood that expertise, technology, and materials were key to Albania's modernization and thus sought to secure them by all means. Confronted with many urgent needs and very few planning professionals, the new Albanian political elites used socialism's narrative of transnational friendship, fraternity, and cooperation to materially connect the tiny state to far-flung places and to secure support for its ambitious agenda.

The Communist authorities' efforts to modernize the nation began with the incorporation of the legacy of urban planning left behind by a decade of Italian involvement in Albania (which included the country's invasion and annexation between 1939 and 1944). Italians left their mark in the form of a monumental north-south axis through the capital Tirana, several civic buildings, and, most importantly, a master plan that provided the template for subsequent development.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, at the height of the Soviet-Albanian friendship, Moscow served as the "mighty patron" that provided both guidance and resources. As was the case for other Eastern Bloc countries, Sovietization meant industrialization at all costs, central economic planning, the introduction of Soviet labor methods, and the arrival of machines. People—experts and advisors—traveled from the Soviet Union to Albania, bringing both knowledge and things—grains, tractors, loans, a cement factory, or an agit-prop bus equipped with radio, gramophone, books, and a film projector, and which roamed the countryside under the banner of the very active League of Albanian-Soviet Cultural Ties.

Albania's relationship to the Soviet Union materialized also through the hundreds of young people who studied at various Soviet universities—among them Ismail Kadare, Albania's most famous writer. Upon their return, these students became an important part of the country's intellectual and professional elite, and through them, Moscow continued to leave its mark on the country's future well after the split of the early 1960s. Perhaps because the Soviet Union's presence in Albania came after, and independently of communism's rise to power, we get the sense that Sovietization and its accompanying flows of people, policies, and material resources was more eagerly—though not always smoothly—embraced, and that it went deeper and unfolded with much less resistance than in other countries of the Eastern Bloc.

From Stalin to Mao is filled with descriptions of workers' lives, in factories, on construction sites, or at home, which, put together, weave a fascinating and powerful account of what the building of socialism looked like in Albanian circumstances. The case of the Stalin textile factory complex is a good example of the engaging way in which the author connects larger abstract political principles, such as the emulation of the Soviet model of industrialization, to the material conditions of the workers. The Stalin textile complex, the first big industrial project built under communism, was erected just outside Tirana using Soviet methods (such as the Kulikov method for laying bricks) and Albanian labor (such as the Stakhanovite Negri Nikolla). Once complete, Albanian hands operated Soviet looms. As a *Kombinat*, it indeed combined work, housing, child-care, and leisure, in an effort to produce not only consumer goods but also socialist consciousness. Mëhilli's discussion of the conditions workers encountered daily, from the food in the cafeteria to the sleeping arrangements in the barracks, suggests a lived experience marked by improvisation and making-do in the face of rapid transformation.

By the mid-1950s, Albania had exchange agreements with the Soviet Union and nine other socialist countries and was operating in a much-expanded network in which people, technology, and goods circulated, propelled by barter, “bilateral exchange,” or fuzzier notions of help, assistance, cooperation, and socialist fraternity. The book devotes much attention to the tensions that such exchanges generated between Albania and other countries of the Eastern Bloc. Those included language barriers, forms of cultural prejudice, and a very real mismatch between a largely unskilled Albanian labor force and the technical complexity of the tasks at hand. A good example was the arrival of concrete—the socialist construction material par excellence, insistently promoted throughout the Soviet bloc from the 1950s onwards—in a country whose building tradition was based on handcrafted mud bricks (*qerpiç*). Many of Mëhilli’s examples point to the fact that intra-bloc unevenness was an important and constitutive aspect of socialism. A list of the “technoscientific agreements between Albania and Bulgaria” from 1956 poignantly illustrates asymmetries between socialist nations: while Bulgaria agreed to provide fifty-two “items,” including one architect and three doctors, Albania in return agreed to send to Bulgaria only two, of which one was “Olive seeds (wild and cultivated)” (p. 144).

The fact that exchange, despite complications and shortcomings, was crucial for the economy and identity of a very small country is confirmed in the second part of the book, which shows that in the wake of the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s, Albania did not cease but instead redirected its internationalist ambitions toward China. A breakdown in relations with the Soviet Union meant a host of reformulated, rather than curtailed, alliances and friendships that included an even broader list of states, such as North Korea, Iraq, Brazil, Vietnam, and Cuba, that mirrored a trend of revolutionary engagement with the Third World, as well as contacts with a myriad of communist groupuscules in western Europe (pp. 218, 225).

The planning, design, and construction of housing was a key domain in which exchange among socialist countries of widely different cultures and levels of industrialization and urbanization was put to the test. “How could one create a unified building system from Germany to China?” asks Mëhilli in describing the challenge of technical exchange and coordination faced by planners, engineers, and architects. It is not, however, the numerous failures and seemingly endless challenges that remain with the reader at the end of a fine-grained and gripping account, but instead the sense of a daring, almost insurgent attempt to build a comprehensive and self-reliant economy in a very small country.

Stanek’s book picks up where Mëhilli’s ends, with the economic shifts of the 1970s that ushered in what we commonly refer to as globalization. *Architecture in Global Socialism* has received well-deserved praise for the way in which it scrambles the east-west polarity that for too long has been used to describe the world in the second half of the twentieth century, and for the way in which it recognizes both socialist and developing countries as agents rather than passive recipients of world-scale change. In uncovering the host of relationships that architects and planners from Eastern European countries established with developing nations, Stanek indeed accomplishes two interrelated historiographic feats: a broader, more complex, and less top-down picture of socialism, in which different actors—from powerful state institutions to individual architects—competed with each other while also at the same time putting forward real alternatives to the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and U.S.-led campaigns to globalize capitalism; and second, a contribution to the growing scholarly effort to write about globalization no longer in terms of unidirectional transfers but instead by capturing encounters that did not seek nor result in forms of domination. Stanek convincingly argues that by panning across different geographic and cultural landscapes, the historian can obtain not a uniform and centrally planned project but instead an assemblage of practices and perspectives that requires a different theoretical model to account for multiplicity, unfamiliarity, and simultaneity. For this, he turns to Martinican writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant, whose concept of “worldmaking” allows Stanek to present the historical material as many ways of “practicing the world” that unfold in the

absence of a clear center. Indeed, a world is to be found in each of the places the book investigates, each containing within it, in various degrees, the promises of socialism, the past experience of coloniality, and the pull of capitalism all at once.

As in the case of Albania, the web of exchanges that generated these worlds was spun from the labor of architects, planners, engineers, and construction workers. The large state design institutes that operated in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and East European socialist countries, and which, by the 1970s, employed thousands of professionals, were also at the forefront of the development of a global socialism. Such was, for instance, the Soviet Giprogor (State Institute for the Planning of Cities), which at the time of its involvement in Ghana in the early 1960s, had been in operation for a generation and employed fifteen hundred professionals. In 1962, Giprogor produced blueprints for a large residential area in the city of Tema on the Ghanaian coast, while another Soviet agency, the Giprostoiindustriia (State Design Institute for the Construction of Industrial Buildings), designed the accompanying prefabrication system and proceeded to ship, install, and put into production a factory for construction elements—a vast (and probably entirely Soviet-subsidized) undertaking abruptly halted by a coup in 1965. The Bulgarian state firm Technoexportstroy (TES) and the Polish planning office Miastoprojekt-Kraków, two other agencies among several that appear at various points in the book, participated in the design and construction of landmark projects such as the National Arts Theater in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1979 (TES), and large-scale commissions in Iraq (the Polish agency), such as the master plan of Baghdad and, later, the General Housing Programme for Iraq (1976-1980). Socialist design institutes produced some of this design work in their home offices but also in satellite offices abroad, thus establishing what a Polish newspaper in 1967 suggestively described as imaginary “air-bridges” between very different realities.

Stanek also follows the work of individual architects who, attracted by the chance to earn more than at home, and to engage with a different set of constraints and freedoms, were hired directly by developing countries, thus engendering a form of exchange that the author terms as capillary. An inspiring example among many is Károly (Charles) Polónyi’s sensitive and moving work in Ghana, for which he tapped into his experience designing for the underdeveloped Hungarian countryside, thus conceiving unexpected imaginary solidarities between inhabitants of very different contexts.

Stanek tells the story of this mobility of architects and architecture and of the worldmaking that comes with them through a variety of locations, each with a different history, colonial past, and political contingencies. Ghana was the country that harbored the most socialist-friendly government of all the examples considered in this book. Although, as a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, its relation with the Soviet Union was one of mere “peaceful coexistence,” its sweeping modernization program nonetheless received significant Soviet backing and support, in the form of the design and construction of an entire housing neighborhood, but also large infrastructural projects. As seems to have always been the case, many other smaller actors were also present, and Ghanaian architects from the Ghana National Construction Corporation worked in collaboration with architects from Bulgaria, Hungary, and Poland.

Modernizing nations from the global South sought out socialist architectural knowhow based on economic calculation as much as on political affinities with the socialist development model. Nigeria’s leaders in the 1970s were hostile to socialism, but nonetheless turned to Eastern European expertise to diversify and stimulate competition among various construction companies. In the 1980s, the numerous Eastern European teams that worked on construction sites and design offices in Abu Dhabi (UAE) and Kuwait City (Kuwait) were there not because of political rapprochement between governments, but as a result of an open market of experts that claimed to altogether bypass political considerations. In that context, the advantage of Czech, Slovak, Polish, or Yugoslavian teams hired in Kuwait, for instance, resided in their technical expertise, in the cultural competence they had acquired while collaborating with partners of vastly different

experiences and cultures, but also in their willingness to accept salaries that were significantly lower than those of professionals from the West. By the 1980s, contracts for socialist experts working in Gulf countries were no longer drawn in the context of intergovernmental treaties, but rather in an environment of competition between socialist countries, the Middle East, North America, western Europe, and south and east Asia. In many ways, the forays of socialist architects in the Global South contravened the official socialist system of economic cooperation and coordination known as the Comecon—a further confirmation of Mēhilli’s argument about the jostling and contestation that marked the internal dynamics of socialism.

What emerges through the stories of socialist architects in Accra, Lagos, Baghdad, Abu-Dhabi and Kuwait City is the seemingly endless adaptability and flexibility of socialist architectural expertise, its ability to take on the tropical condition, for instance (in the work of Polish architects in Ghana), to reflect Arab culture (as required by UAE legislation), or to make use of local materials, technologies, skills, and traditional forms of land tenure. Beyond questions of design, socialist experts also found their way through endlessly reconfigured conditions of foreign trade and barter.

Socialism never was a monolithic political and economic project, but by the late 1970s, one can find the command-and-control systems of the centralized states operating alongside market mechanisms, fierce competition between different economic actors, and forms of trade with capitalist states. *Second World Postmodernisms*, the collection of essays edited by Vladimir Kulić, continues this line of investigation of socialism by describing, through thirteen case studies, the multiplicity of debates, ambitions, values, and concerns that occupied the architectural profession. The book draws connections between the architects’ heterogeneous production in the last two socialist decades and their eager but clear-eyed engagement with postmodernism, and rightly asks if this requires us to redefine a notion firmly associated with capitalism. Equally incitingly, the book as a whole explores how socialist architecture developed and transformed beyond the mass construction mandates that dominated the postwar decades. These questions receive thirteen richly articulated answers, each about a different facet of a vast socialist world that extended from the Caribbean to east Asia.

Although the essays cover seemingly irreconcilable contexts and practices that range from the design of a flower store for an Estonian collective farm (Andres Kurg) to billboards for the promotion of the collective sugar cane harvest (*zafra*) in Cuba (Fredo Rivera), or from suggestive, fairy tale-like drawings of an architecture unmoored from Soviet reality (Alla Vronskaya) to the hard practicalities of contracts for Polish architects working abroad (Stanek), some important general insights emerge from their combination. In various ways, all thirteen essays reveal a generation of architects highly alert to the shortcomings of large-scale architectural production, and eager to remedy them, thus offering an energetic rebuttal to any dismissal of socialist architectural practice as flatly subservient to rigid and narrow state mandates. Instead, the many architectural practices subsumed in these texts under the term of postmodernism share a determination to expand what was possible.

One of the revelations of this book is the lucidity with which Soviet and Eastern European socialist architects diagnosed postmodernism’s promises, but also its shortcomings: if Czechoslovak architectural theory debates centered around the potential to “humanize” planning processes that had long emphasized material and technical aspects (Maroš Krivý), Soviet architects were critical of the “capitulation” of the utopian aspirations of the “pioneers” of the modern movement and of a “submissive service to the client” (Richard Anderson). While Hungarian architects eagerly sought ways to integrate national or folk traditions (Virág Molnar), critic and editor Radomíra Sedláková trenchantly warned architects not to “whine for lost historical values” (Krivý).

The meaning attached to postmodernism also seems to have varied significantly from country to country. In Poland, the state eagerly appropriated postmodernism as evidence of the country’s

socialist development (Lidia Klein and Alicja Gzowska), while in the context of Estonia's national independence movement, postmodernist architecture purportedly could "address different people and tell different stories," and thus challenge modernist universalist claims and offer resistance to Soviet power (Kurg 116). In China, postmodernism was associated with the economic reforms and liberalization of the 1980s, and was thus considered part of the country's continued development toward communism (Cole Roskam). In all contexts, architects participating in this multifaceted phenomenon produced designs that depart, at times wildly, from our conventional expectations about socialist practices: Polish architects in Kuwait were at the forefront of the use of CAD (computer-aided design) and computerized management systems for construction sites (Stanek), while Yugoslavian architect Bogdan Bogdanović insisted on the utopian possibilities of architectural practice through highly original sculptural forms (Kulić).

At times, the histories that emerge from these essays closely echo our own contemporary concerns and discussions. Indeed, another revelation of this book is that far from being arcane matters from another time and another place, the questions agitating socialist architects in the 1970s and 1980s bear a striking resemblance to ours today. In Belgrade, "Interdisciplinary organizations . . . instigated and fostered research into environment and design, housing for underprivileged social groups, socio-spatial processes of illegal urban sprawl, and problems of the so-called unhygienic settlements spreading on the city's periphery" (Ljiljana Blagojević), a list that matches the curriculum at any American architecture school today, prompting doubt about the profession's ability to address satisfactorily any of these issues, given their enduring persistence half a century later.

Mëhilli's account of the Albanian example reminds us that the socialist regimes in the decades after World War II attempted to build an alternative to the economic system of the West; Stanek shows that, however, by the 1970s, socialist states increasingly agreed to play by the rules of the market their architects encountered in the Global South. Many of the essays in *Second World Postmodernisms* further flesh out how, by the 1980s, socialism, still a powerful political entity, was nonetheless operating in a global system of knowledge, commissions, and experts that was increasingly organized and regulated according to capitalist principles. Although institutional rules changed and tried to adapt, socialist states and the Soviet Union had become unwilling, and perhaps unable, to challenge capitalism itself. Put together, these books describe how the possibility of an alternative world system progressively diminished throughout the twentieth century. A contradiction thus seems to emerge from these multifaceted portraits of postmodernism: are the many practices it contains evidence of an open-ended "perpetual experiment that constantly rewrites the rules of the game" (Reinhold Martin), or are we instead witnessing a globalizing and ever-more tightly gripping market of freely circulating capital and expertise, with capitalism the only game in town? Architectural freedom in this sense might mean the opposite, a more perfect dominance of certain kinds of economic relations.

The omnipresence and expanding role of the market in many discussions of socialist postmodernism seems tied to a planning and design expertise increasingly presenting itself as depoliticized, and to a general wishing away of politics after a generation of highly politicized practices. This comes through in Vronskaya's moving essay about the delightful evasions of Soviet architects in the 1970s and 1980s, whose "paper architecture" functioned as a radical withdrawal from the productivist ethos of modernization, and as a way to liberate architecture "without entering into a political confrontation with the regime" (p. 157). In his essay for *Second World Postmodernisms*, Stanek points out the increasingly mercantile calculations that enabled Polish architects to work abroad, as part of their foreign salary would be retained by their home institution in Poland and helped alleviate the demand for foreign currency that squeezed the entire socialist world after the demise of the Bretton Woods system in 1973.

As several essays observe architecture's retreat from socialist politics, other authors warn against our own apolitical reading of those years. Ana Miljački suggests that the echoes of First

World experiments in the architectural solutions of Czechoslovakian postmodernism, rather than being read as evidence of the influence of the West, open instead an opportunity to rethink “the discursive hegemony of Western European scholarship” and its accompanying tropes of influence and delayed development. She argues, convincingly, that in the Czechoslovak and other socialist contexts, postmodernism produced critiques of the state that were both internally specific and actively participating in intellectual debates that stretched beyond national borders. In the book’s postscript, Martin argues that although the case studies are all firmly inscribed in the “Cold War’s semantic field,” these histories of postmodernism are far from direct proof of capitalism’s triumph and socialism’s capitulation. Instead, historians can recover from these particular moments potentials and critiques that are still relevant today, such as the possibility of different forms of architectural agency or authorship, or the need to remain alert to the contradictions that erode all big stories—modernism, socialism, and especially the biggest story of all, capitalism—from within.

In the end, it is the books themselves, with their composite and invaluable rich materials, that illustrate most poignantly the power of the particular in the face of a global imperative. This is ultimately played out in the tension between the essential role of multilingual research and the hegemonic hold of the English language. It turns out that to build and to narrate an interconnected world requires a breathtaking range of linguistic competencies. Mëhilli and Stanek both make this case in illuminating postscripts on sources, and *Second World Postmodernisms* confirms it through its editorial scope. Albanian archives contained documents written in nonstandard Albanian, Italian, German, Serbo-Croatian, Russian, and Chinese; Stanek drew from Bulgarian, Czechoslovak, East German, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, Soviet, and Yugoslav architectural journals and documents in Arabic; between them, the authors of *Second World Postmodernisms* command materials in at least ten different languages. That this heterogeneity requires English translation to be fully comprehended reenacts the bind of a socialist project that was both made possible and eventually consumed by its international reach.

Author Biography

Juliana Maxim is an associate professor of architectural history and Chair in the Department of Art, Architecture + Art History at the University of San Diego. Her recent book is titled *The Socialist Life of Modern Architecture: Bucharest, 1949-1965* (Routledge, 2019).