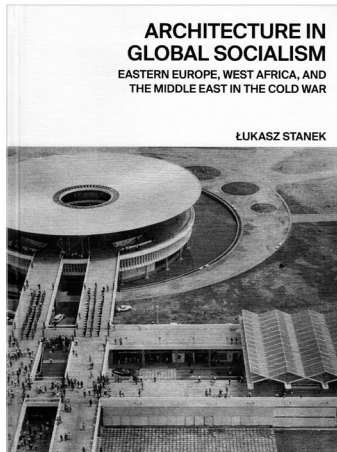


Book Reviews



Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War. By Łukasz Stanek. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. 368 pp., 150 color + 127 b/w illus. ISBN 9780691168708.

In architectural history, it is rare that a single book reshapes the knowledge of an entire period. *Architecture in Global Socialism* does precisely that: it adds such a large piece to the puzzle of twentieth-century architecture that the decades of the Cold War can no longer be properly understood without it.

From the late 1950s until the global collapse of state socialism in the late 1980s, Eastern Europe exported an unprecedented amount of architectural and planning expertise, labor, technology and material to Africa and the Middle East, an effort that virtually reinvented entire cities. Motivated at first by anticolonial solidarity and later by increasing commercial pressures, designers, agencies and companies from socialist countries successfully competed with those from the capitalist West both for influence in the emerging global South and for a market share of it. Those of us who came of age in the last years of socialism have always been vaguely familiar with fragments of that story, but until Łukasz Stanek initiated his long-term research on the topic a decade ago no one fully understood the extent of such architectural exchanges. Reassembling these fragments into a coherent picture is one of the book's major achievements, making it clear that intense architectural interactions with the postcolonial world were common to practically all of Eastern Europe, rather than just one or another maverick country.

Of similar importance are the book's theoretical underpinnings. Stanek frames the story as a case of "worldmaking," which draws attention to its global scale; but it also highlights its distinction from the neoliberal globalization of the past half century, which is recast as only one among many possible versions of worldmaking. At the same time, Stanek reframes architectural history as a history of urbanization, which allows him to consider the production of architecture in relation to a wide range of topics, not least the global circulation of finance, goods and labor. Indeed, the entanglements with economy not only provide the background context for the analysis, but constitute one of its key dimensions, illuminating the changing roles that architecture played in the economy of socialist worldmaking. Despite such broad expansion of the disciplinary scope and scale, however, the book always remains anchored in architectural history through its consistent focus on the activities of the architectural profession.

The Cold War is typically understood as a sharp division, poignantly embodied in the figure of the Berlin Wall. But from the perspective of the global South, Stanek contends, a rather different picture emerges: not of division but rather of a competitive encounter. The book focuses on Accra, Lagos, Baghdad, Abu Dhabi, and Kuwait City as the places that underwent unusual degrees of architectural internationalization following the establishment of the independent states of, respectively, Ghana, Nigeria, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. These rapidly modernizing cities became the privileged sites for a comparison of the practices, motivations and effectiveness of different overlapping networks of agents. Most East European architects who worked there acted within the integrative framework of the Comecon (Council of Mutual Economic Assistance), which sought to harmonize the economies of socialist countries under Soviet leadership. At the

same time, all five host countries, as well as Yugoslavia, belonged to another organization, the Non-Aligned Movement, which fought for the political and economic independence of former colonies, neutrality in their engagement with Cold War superpowers, and mutual solidarity on the path to modernization.

Last but not least, European metropolises continued to maintain their architectural presence in their former colonies long after decolonization, but they also had to contend with the new dominant power within the West's own ranks, the United States. As a result, actors of greatly varied cultural, ideological and economic backgrounds operated in close contact with each other, which naturally included a great deal of competition but also involved various forms of collaboration and mutual learning across geopolitical boundaries. The binary image of the Cold War world, which appears rather neat when seen from the global North, thus emerges as much more complicated when seen from the South. Consequently, it is not an exaggeration to say that, in order to fully understand the architecture of the era, one may learn less from going to Moscow or New York or Berlin than to Accra or Lagos or Baghdad.

This review is far too short to even begin doing justice to the complexity of Stanek's book and to the numerous story lines, architects, buildings, planning documents, clients, and agencies that it brings together. The specific case studies range from regional and urban plans and designs for individual buildings to ethnographic research and university curricula. Their geographical scope is equally impressive. In addition to the two African and three Middle Eastern countries mentioned above as destinations of architecture's mobility, the book covers no less than seven former East European states in which that architecture originated: Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the U.S.S.R., and Yugoslavia. The research is based on an even wider range of sources, including archives, periodicals and interlocutors from all the above-mentioned countries, as well as another six archives in the West.

The readers of this journal may find it especially relevant to learn that the book features extensive discussions of traditional settlements because East European architects played an important role in the study and modern reinterpretation of vernacular architecture in the global South. Particularly relevant in this respect is the extended section in Chapter 3 dedicated to the activities of the Polish architect Zbigniew Dmochowski, who applied his experience in studying the architecture of Polish villages to Nigeria. During his extended stays there between 1958 and 1981, Dmochowski designed several regional museums based on vernacular typologies, including the Museum of Traditional Nigerian Architecture in the city of Jos. Of equal importance were his extensive ethnographic studies, which resulted in the monumental three-volume *Introduction to Nigerian Traditional Architecture*, published posthumously in an incomplete form in 1990.

Another relevant case presented by Stanek involves discussions of traditional Islamic architecture as a basis for contemporary design in the Persian Gulf, which came as a backlash in the 1970s and 1980s against the placeless of previous foreign-led modernization. Again, the experience acquired back home allowed East Europeans to claim competence for such tasks in the Middle East. For example, Bulgarian architects and contractors, who were responsible for a number of high-profile projects in Abu Dhabi, made sure to advertise their competence in preserving their own Islamic heritage back home. However, the result of such efforts was not the preservation of the existing vernacular, but more often than not a form of postmodernism that merely applied traditional ornament to ubiquitous modern typologies such as administration buildings or conference centers.

In sum, *Architecture in Global Socialism* is a groundbreaking work that provides both a theoretical framework and an empirical map for future research. As such, it is certain to be an indispensable reference in the history of twentieth-century architecture for many years to come.

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