

Book Review

***Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War.* By Łukasz Stanek. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2020. vii + 368 pp. \$60.00 (hardback).**

Second- and Third World entanglements are a booming field of research on post-1945 Eastern Europe. The past decade or so has witnessed a veritable profusion of case studies tracking the myriad ways in which economic, cultural and political bonds were forged between the socialist and postcolonial worlds.

In his remarkably rich and original new study, Łukasz Stanek enlists architecture as a lens through which to illustrate the complexity of these interactions. The history of modern architecture, he argues, is a history ‘of resources circulating at various scales and with various speeds’ (p. 303). And it is precisely these circulations that stand at the centre of this work. Spanning Accra, Lagos, Baghdad, Abu Dhabi and Kuwait City, *Architecture in Global Socialism* reveals an exciting and vibrant world of interplays between Eastern European construction experts and the postcolonial states in which they undertook their work.

Architecture, runs the key message of the book, was bound up in global systems of technical, cultural and economic exchange. It is subsequently revealed as both an arm of diplomacy and an agent of what Stanek helpfully terms ‘socialist worldmaking’. This yielded some interesting power dynamics. For Moscow, the decolonizing world presented rich opportunities to extend the hand of friendship and mobilize new allies against the old imperial Western powers. And from the perspective of many governments in the Global South, cooperation with the ‘Second World’ could help their countries integrate into new global networks. Indeed, it is a real strength of Stanek’s work that he is able to expose the multi-directional character of what on the surface may simply look like a Moscow-led effort to marshal an anti-imperial alliance between Eastern Europe and the decolonizing states. This is but one of many ways in which *Architecture in Global Socialism* is able to shatter some old Cold War assumptions.

At the same time, Stanek’s work also helps to break up the uniform category of ‘socialist Eastern Europe.’ Though the architects and planners active in the decolonizing countries were nominally representing the ‘socialist world’ in quasi-diplomatic missions to facilitate the ‘socialist worldmaking’ process, the reality is that the bulk of the exchanges were conducted on the basis of bilateral arrangements between individual Eastern European states and their hosts. What’s more, these kinds of arrangements could generate competition as well as coordination between the socialist countries themselves.

Perhaps most significantly, *Architecture in Global Socialism* reveals how the character of these relationships changed in fundamental ways as the decades unfolded. In a basic sense, this might be read as a story of fading Soviet importance. By the time a series of Polish planners were employed to produce the master plan for Baghdad in the 1960s and 1970s, the old Soviet-led ‘world socialist system’ of Nikita Khrushchev had yielded to something more multidirectional, untethered from the idea that socialist worldmaking would be predicated on ‘a specifically Soviet path of development’ (p. 170).

Furthermore, the fact that architectural exchanges were carried by the changing winds of foreign trade meant that the purposes of the Eastern European architectural ventures

shifted considerably over time. By the 1970s, the allure of raw materials and hard currency to the economically struggling socialist states began to render their activities in places like Iraq more transactional. While back in the 1950s and 60s many buildings and projects had been offered by the socialists as ‘gifts’ to their anti-imperial brothers-in-arms, the ‘distinction between aid and trade from socialist countries’ was much less clear-cut by the 1970s (p. 181). And these foundational shifts in the global economy also had an aesthetic and formal impact. By the 1970s and 1980s, as the economic sclerosis of the Soviet world began to take the shine off the idea of socialist globalism, the visual idioms of architectural modernism also began to lose their appeal. As a result, the Eastern Europeans had to begin dreaming up ways of integrating ‘traditional’ designs into their plans. The upshot was a series of new aesthetic norms and technical skills that they in turn carried back with them to Europe.

Though *Architecture in Global Socialism* is largely focused on Eastern Europeans and their doings in far-flung lands, this was not, the author demonstrates, a hermetically sealed-off world. Western firms, architects and governments are never far away from the analysis. Interactions between experts from the capitalist and socialist worlds could be creative and productive experiences, but they also generate tensions and resentments. This sometimes reflected an intriguing asymmetry in Cold War valuations of culture. While Eastern European architects saw themselves as participating in a genuinely international architectural discourse, Westerners tended to arrogate to themselves an exclusive right to ‘cultural’ production: in their eyes the projects undertaken by the socialist world were ‘technical’ achievements only (p. 93).

In sum, this is a vitally important work of historical scholarship. Stanek employs a microscopic lens on his case studies—some parts of the analysis are very finely detailed indeed—but through these we catch a glimpse of the moving parts of an extremely complex global system. Above all, it is to the author’s credit that *Architecture in Global Socialism* can be read with great benefit from a multitude of perspectives: as an analysis of the rise and fall of socialist modernity; of transmissions between the ‘Second’ and ‘Third’ Worlds; of the roles played by architecture and architectural labour as political and economic instruments in the Cold War; and—not least—as an architectural and planning history of five intriguing case studies. On all of these subjects, this is a landmark study.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghab063>

Marcus Colla
University of Oxford, UK