

Polish architects in the world socialist system

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Architects from the People's Republic of Poland (and others from the Second World) working in the Global South during the Cold War, occupied a 'world system' – this entry shows – whose own centre–periphery dynamics were relatively autonomous and not reducible to those of Wallerstein's capitalist sphere of hegemony and dependency. This Socialist World System (SWS), Stanek's entry insinuates, did not die in 1989–91. Polish (and other) architects learned hybrid skills in the course of their functioning within it, which they then turned to their advantage while navigating the waters of the country's nascent postsocialist realities. The SWS's material legacies – and institutional path-dependencies – like those of the Second World, are still with us today.

'West Africa was as far to the West as we could get' – this is how Polish architect Grażyna Jonkajtys-Luba recalled her work in Ghana under its first independent leader, Kwame Nkrumah (1957–66).¹ Luba and other Polish and Eastern European architects and planners travelled to West Africa in the wake of Khrushchev's opening towards the newly independent countries, which included the world-wide promotion of the socialist path of development. In the service of state design institutions and contractors in Ghana, they contributed to the development of the country, including the construction of housing and social facilities, as well as the modernisation of industry and agriculture according to the Soviet model.

Yet Luba's motivation, and those of her Polish, Bulgarian, Hungarian and Yugoslav colleagues, to go to Ghana were rarely political. These architects were attracted by the opportunities of international travel and were eager to leave behind the austerity of post-Stalinist Eastern Europe.

If the former British colony appeared, on Luba's mental map, to be closer to Western Europe than Poland, it was because Ghana's cosmopolitan environment allowed for easier exchanges across Cold War divides. Such exchanges, including architectural ones, were important for her and her colleagues, who often accepted foreign contracts motivated by professional ambition. In particular, travels to Ghana offered them opportunities to work on prestigious projects in Accra, the country's capital, such as the State House Complex (1965) and the International Trade Fair (1967).²

Professional ambition comes to the fore in the personal dossier that Grażyna Jonkajtys-Luba submitted to the Association of Polish Architects in Warsaw (SARP). Her submission was part of the application for the status of 'architect-creator' that came with specific benefits in socialist Poland, including access to scarce commodities and working spaces. The application consisted of a professional curriculum vitae listing education, employment, awards, as well as a self-assessment of her 'main creative achievements', supported by a portfolio, in which Luba included her work in Ghana and her later designs for Nigeria. In compiling the dossier, she engaged in a delicate balance between the need to demonstrate her individual creativity and also to comply with the rules of professional collegiality: while highlighting her personal contribution to each design, she needed not to omit the contributions of others. They included her husband, architect Jerzy Luba, with whom she collaborated in Ghana and Nigeria, and who also submitted a dossier to SARP.

During the socialist period, hundreds of architects filed similar applications, and Luba's is one of 417 dossiers which include references to work abroad. They add up to a unique archive: self-curated, since it was compiled by its protagonists who chose the content of their files; and performative, since the role of each dossier was to demonstrate the creative labour of the applicant. As an archive of Polish architectural exports it is in no way complete, since the dossier submitted to SARP only included work up to the moment of the application (1984 in Luba's case). Furthermore, many architects who went abroad did not submit a dossier at all, and one of the reasons might have been the hiatus between the expectation of an individual architectural oeuvre in the application process and the reality of collective work in state-socialist design institutes.

However incomplete, when taken together, these dossiers can be used to map a preliminary geography of architectural collaboration between socialist Poland and the Global South. I mapped it by digitising

the data from the SARP archive and feeding it to Gephi, a networks analysis software. Gephi produces force-directed graphs which consist of nodes connected by edges. The graphs show forces between any two nodes: each node exerts a repulsive force on all other nodes, while two nodes connected by an edge attract.

When using Gephi, I interpreted as nodes each of the 417 architects whose dossiers include at least one reference to designs abroad. In turn, I defined edges as countries where these designs were located. Accordingly, two nodes representing two architects are connected by an edge representing a particular country, if each of them worked on at least one design destined for that country. The architect in question could have worked on these designs either in their destination countries or in Poland at any time between the 1950s and the 1980s. By connecting architects through the territories in or for which they worked, the resulting graph begins to map the mobility of Polish architects within state-socialist networks during the Cold War (see [Figure 39.1](#)).

At the centre of this map are the countries receiving the greatest number of architectural designs from socialist Poland: Iraq, Libya and Algeria, followed by Syria, while countries visited by fewer architects are located on the fringes. (The map is limited to the twelve most actively involved destination countries.) The map is not time-sensitive, and it covers the whole period of Polish architectural engagements during the Cold War. Yet the centrality or peripherality of a particular country in the map often approximates the length of these engagements, which accumulated throughout the years. For instance, Ghana was a destination for Polish architects for not much longer than a decade (during and shortly after Nkrumah's tenure), while the UAE became a destination only in the 1980s. By contrast, Iraq, Libya, Algeria and Syria received them during longer periods and, for instance, Iraq was open to the socialist bloc between the coup of Qasim in 1958 and the first Gulf war in 1990.

In the wake of the 1973 oil embargo, Libya and Iraq became the main destination of Polish architects. This embargo was a game changer in socialist foreign trade, as some of the profits of Arab governments deposited in Western financial institutions were lent to socialist countries intent upon modernising their economies. Yet they did not achieve the envisaged industrial leap and, in order to finance their debt, Poland and several other Eastern European countries boosted their exports, including those of design and construction services. Put under pressure from state and party leadership, architects, planners and managers of construction companies actively sought commissions in booming oil

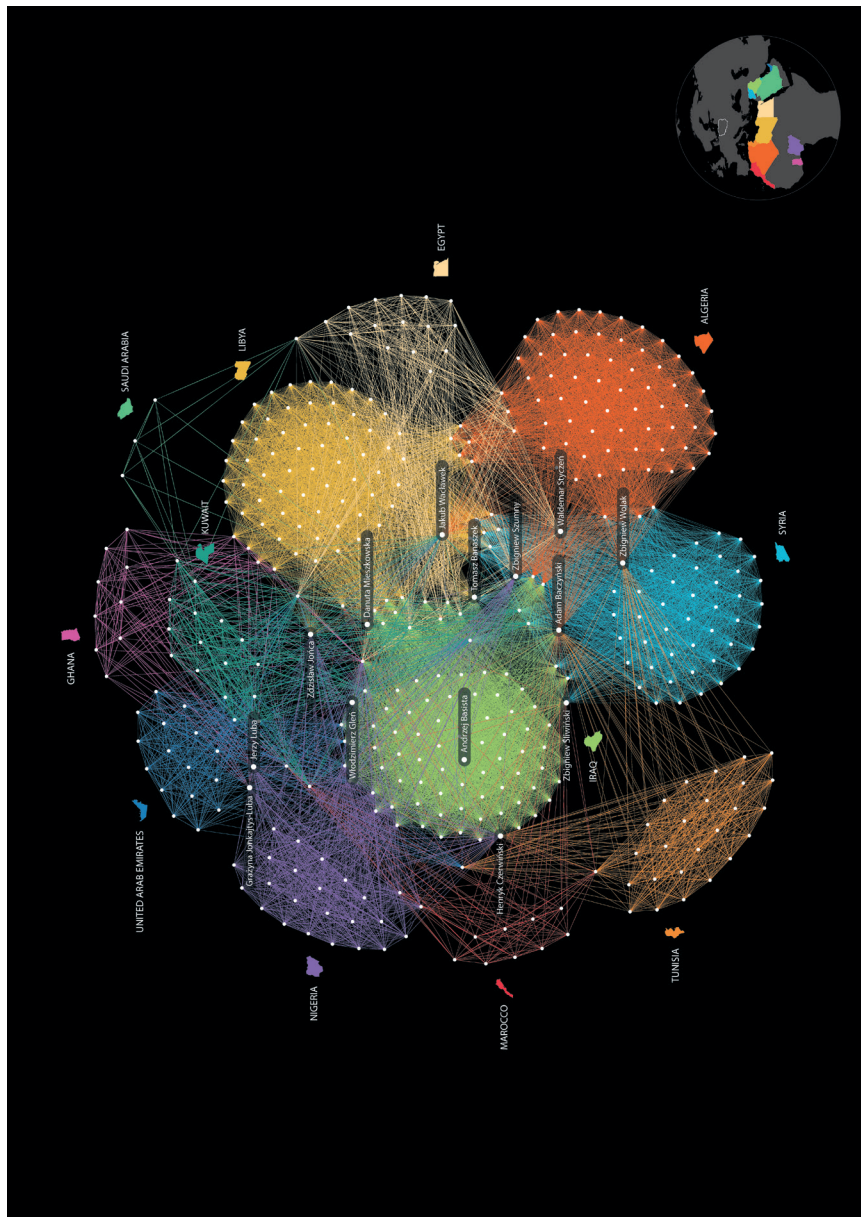


Figure 39.1 Patterns of geographic deployment of members of the Association of Polish Architects during the Cold War. The architects whose names are highlighted in the graph are discussed in the text.

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producing countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The favourite principle of these exchanges was barter, or the exchange of goods and services without the mediation of money, and in particular the exchange of Eastern European goods and services for crude oil (petrobarter) from Iraq, Libya and elsewhere.

The geography of these exchanges is captured by the map, and it is at odds with the Cold War discourse about a world divided into two camps dominated by two 'superpowers'. Rather, at the map's centre are countries which were neither following the Soviet path of development, nor Soviet-supported Marxist-Leninist regimes. While often nominally socialist, Iraq, Libya, Algeria and Syria guarded their sovereignty against the Soviet Union and exploited East–West rivalries to advance their strategic priorities in security, state building and industrial development (and sometimes prosecuted their local communist parties). In this sense, the map shows what Soviet economists called the World Socialist System, or a community of countries trading with the socialist bloc on preferential terms. While the core of the system was the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon), the system was not limited to the Soviet allies, and its theorists argued that it was open to all countries, irrespective of their economic and social orientation.³

Besides mapping the centres and peripheries of the World Socialist System as they were traversed by Polish architects, this map also tracks their trajectories. They reflect the organisation of the export of architectural labour from socialist Poland and its legal frameworks. In general, Polish architects and planners were mobilised by two types of contracts.⁴ The first concerned specific design commissions which straddled all scales, from a regional plan to architectural blueprints, and they were sometimes packaged with the commission to construct the buildings designed. Polish design institutes such as Miastoprojekt Kraków established field offices to work on larger planning commissions, such as the master plans of Baghdad (1967 and 1973) and Iraq's General Housing Programme (1976–80). Many architects who are shown in the map as having worked in Iraq were based in Miastoprojekt's field office in Baghdad, headed in the late 1970s by Danuta Mieszkowska.⁵

The second type of contract was an employment contract signed between individual professionals and an institution abroad, including a planning institute, a university, a local or national authority and sometimes a private architectural office. Such a contract was signed by Andrzej Basista who first travelled to Baghdad for the master plan commission, and then stayed in Iraq to teach at the School of Architecture, Baghdad University. Mieszkowska, Basista and other members of the

Miastoprojekt team in Baghdad typically stayed for several years in Iraq. After the ending of their original commissions, some among them became employed in other countries in the region, as several nodes in the centre of the map show. One of them represents the trajectory of Włodzimierz Gleń, who relocated from Iraq to Kuwait.

By contrast, nodes in the map which are connected to multiple countries – and float between them – often represent experts who worked as consultants with various governments on behalf of international organisations, such as the United Nations. A case in point is Zbigniew Wolak, who worked for the municipal and planning departments in Syria, Tunisia and Algeria, but also in countries not shown on the map, such as Indonesia, Guinea, Qatar and Western Samoa. Others, like Zdzisław Jońca, were members of expert bodies in Poland, where they advised on tender submissions. Most frequently, however, people represented by floating nodes were designers in charge of international tenders within specialised design institutes, including BISTYP, or the Institute for Research and Type Projects in Industrial Architecture (Zbigniew Śliwiński), as well as chemical industry (Waldemar Styczeń, Zbigniew Szumny), health care (Tomasz Banaszek) and wood-processing industry (Henryk Czerwiński). Other such nodes represent architects who submitted designs to international design competitions (Adam Baczyński, Jakub Waclawek).

The map of the trajectories of Polish architecture in the Cold War challenges capitalist triumphalism that, after the end of socialism, reduced architecture's globalisation to Westernisation or Americanisation, and retroactively extended these narratives into a teleological development path of architecture after the Second World War. Against the Cold War propaganda and its afterlives, this map shows that global urbanisation and its architecture resulted from complex and uneven negotiations in which geopolitical aims, state-building objectives and national economic plans were combined with personal ambitions and desires. By the 1990s, much of this geography of architectural mobilities fell apart in the wake of the wars in Iraq, then Libya and Syria and the collapse of state-socialist institutions in charge of Polish construction export. In postsocialist Poland, few architects advertised their foreign engagements within state socialist networks, and in this sense, when looked at today, this map approximates a repressed memory of a profession that eagerly embraced the turn towards market economy. This memory sometimes haunts the architectures designed and built after the end of socialism in Poland. While embracing the postmodern idiom that was meant to herald Poland's 'return' to Europe, these buildings may also afford a more

private reading: complex geometries that might have been drawn by a hand trained in arabesques; pastel panels that resemble those weathered under a desert sun; and references to ‘traditional European urbanism’ that had been carefully studied in the many ‘little Parises’ of the Maghreb and the Levant.

Notes

- 1 Jonkajtys-Luba, 2011; see also Stanek, 2020.
- 2 Stanek, 2015.
- 3 Zevin, 1976, 26.
- 4 Grzywnowicz and Kiedrzyński, 1972.
- 5 Stanek, 2012.

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