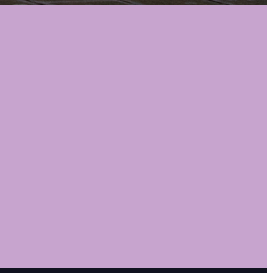


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In the wake of the oil embargos of the early 1970s and the concurrent debt crisis that was unfolding in many socialist countries throughout Eastern Europe, their political leadership insisted on the privileging of exports in order to gain the convertible currency that would be necessary for debt repayment. That included the export of design and construction services, with managers of socialist design institutes and construction companies often turning towards the booming, oil-producing countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Many contemporary commentators saw these activities as testifying to a process of global economic integration.¹ However, a focus on the architectural and construction sectors across oil-producing countries, including Iraq, suggests that this integration was based on an exploitation of the differences between socialist and capitalist political economies, rather than their overcoming.

The presence of state-socialist design institutes, construction companies and architects in Iraq from the late 1950s to the late 1980s was part of a broader opening of Eastern Europe towards newly independent countries across Africa and Asia during the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1953–1964).² Reconsidering these exchanges can therefore enable us to reconceptualise architectural mobilities during the Cold War, which until recently have been reduced to the long consequences of colonial occupation and the globalisation of capitalism.

In this context, the ambiguities of Eastern Europe’s colonial history complicate the binary of coloniser and colonised that has informed much of the written history of 20th-century world-wide architectural mobilities. These ambiguities pertained to the region’s participation in European colonialism, indulgence in colonial fantasies and enforcement of internal colonisation programmes, and at the same time its exposure to the colonisation and genocide that culminated in the Nazi-German Generalplan-Ost. The offers of architectural resources from socialist countries to the newly independent countries, including Iraq, reflected these complex historical experiences, while at the same time expanded the horizon of choice for local professionals and put former colonial subjects in the position of being assessors of architectural resources that were coming from various directions, including from the former colonial centre.³ At the same time, imported building technologies, planning typologies, construction materials and professional personnel exposed Iraq to the risks of new types of financial, institutional, regulatory and technological hegemony, notably those of the Soviet Union.

Within the broader economic history of the Cold War, a focus on the mobilities of design services and construction industries provides a useful vantage point from which to understand the evolving dynamics of the political economy of the exchanges between socialist Eastern Europe and

African and Asian countries in the wake of administrative decolonisation. When working on such export projects, Eastern European architects, planners and engineers, and their local counterparts in Africa and Asia, sought to exploit the openings and alleviate the constraints of the political economy of socialist foreign trade. This becomes particularly clear in countries that accepted construction services and resources from both socialist and western enterprises, such as Iraq, where the ability of Eastern European actors to negotiate the political economy of state socialism is evident. These negotiations shaped professionals’ conditions of work, the conditions of their collaboration with local partners and, ultimately, the decisions that shaped buildings and cities in many different locations.

Two important features of this political economy that comes to the fore in studying state-socialist architectural mobilities is the inconvertibility of Eastern European currencies and the preference that state-socialist actors had for bartering transactions as a consequence.⁴ Both impacted the programming, materiality, technology and choices made concerning construction labour and the organisation of Eastern European construction sites in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities from the 1950s to the 1980s. Two key projects exemplify various facets of this dynamic: the masterplans for the city delivered by the Poles between 1967 and 1973 on the one hand and, on the other, an industrial slaughterhouse designed by East Germans but built by Romanians during the 1980s.

ADVANTAGES OF INCONVERTIBILITY

Eastern European design institutes and construction companies began working in Iraq shortly after the 1958 coup, led by colonel Qasim, and continued working in the country until the end of the Cold War.⁵ While the work on Baghdad’s masterplan resulted from a tender won during the Qasim period, when the new Iraqi government secured technical assistance from the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellite states, it continued until the 1970s across numerous regime changes in Iraq. Two plans (produced in 1967 and 1973) were delivered by the Polish planning office Miastoprojekt Kraków, perhaps best known for its earlier design of Nowa Huta, ‘the first socialist city in Poland’. The delivery of these masterplans was mediated by Polservice, a foreign trade organisation that specialised in the export of labour from socialist Poland. Given the state monopoly on foreign trade under socialism, organisations of this kind were responsible for all foreign transactions of Polish companies.

Miastoprojekt’s masterplan for Baghdad replaced the one produced by the British firm Minoprio and Spencley and PW Macfarlane in 1956.⁶ The proposal confirmed some of the decisions of its predecessor, including the general ovoid

State-Socialist Building Export to Iraq

Łukasz Stanek

shape of the city, which would be surrounded by a green belt and planned based on the principle of the neighbourhood unit. Departing from the earlier plan, however, Miastoprojekt drew on the experience of Polish planning, notably that of the city of Warsaw since the 1930s, to envisage Baghdad on the regional scale. Acknowledging the process of postwar reconstruction in Warsaw, which had negotiated the re-creation of a historical image with the modern requirements of mass mobility, the Polish planners also opposed the large-scale demolition of Baghdad’s Ottoman-era urban fabric.⁷

These features were important for the Iraqi decision-makers, but so too were the financial conditions of the plan. Polservice offered conditions that were more competitive than those of western planning firms, and its ability to do so was related, at least in part, to the inconvertibility of the Polish currency, the zloty, as opposed to the Iraqi dinar, the value of which was pegged to that of the US dollar. This becomes clear in the agreement made to implement the masterplan, which consisted of two contracts, and the minutes of the negotiations that took place to settle it. The first contract (stipulated in dinars) was signed between Polservice and the Municipality of Baghdad, and the second (stipulated in zlotys) between Polservice and Miastoprojekt. After the subtraction of Polservice’s fee, a part of the dinars paid to Polservice by the Iraqi side was used to cover the operating costs of Miastoprojekt’s field office in Baghdad. Another part was changed into zlotys and transferred to Miastoprojekt.⁸

Exchange rates for the latter transaction were subject to fierce negotiation between the two Polish organisations following Polservice’s decision to yield to the demands of the Municipality and extend the range of the services being offered. Notably, this included the production of a comprehensive survey of Baghdad. Polservice was then able to offset the resulting costs of this work by imposing a lower exchange rate for the Iraqi currency on Miastoprojekt, and hence a lower payment in the Polish currency for the planning office.⁹

In so doing, Polservice could have quoted from the guidelines of the Polish government, which stated: ‘the difference between the conversion rate [used for the transactions] and an average cost of earning one US dollar by means of export is to be seen as compensation owed to the state for the reduction of the national income caused by the deployment of Polish specialists in institutions and enterprises abroad.’¹⁰ Yet while economists tried to estimate the value of Polish currency by generalising the costs of earning one US dollar in particular export contracts, such generalisations proved highly problematic. In this sense, the exchange rate agreed between Miastoprojekt and Polservice resulted less from economic calculation and rather reflected the uneven power relationship that existed between the two organisations.

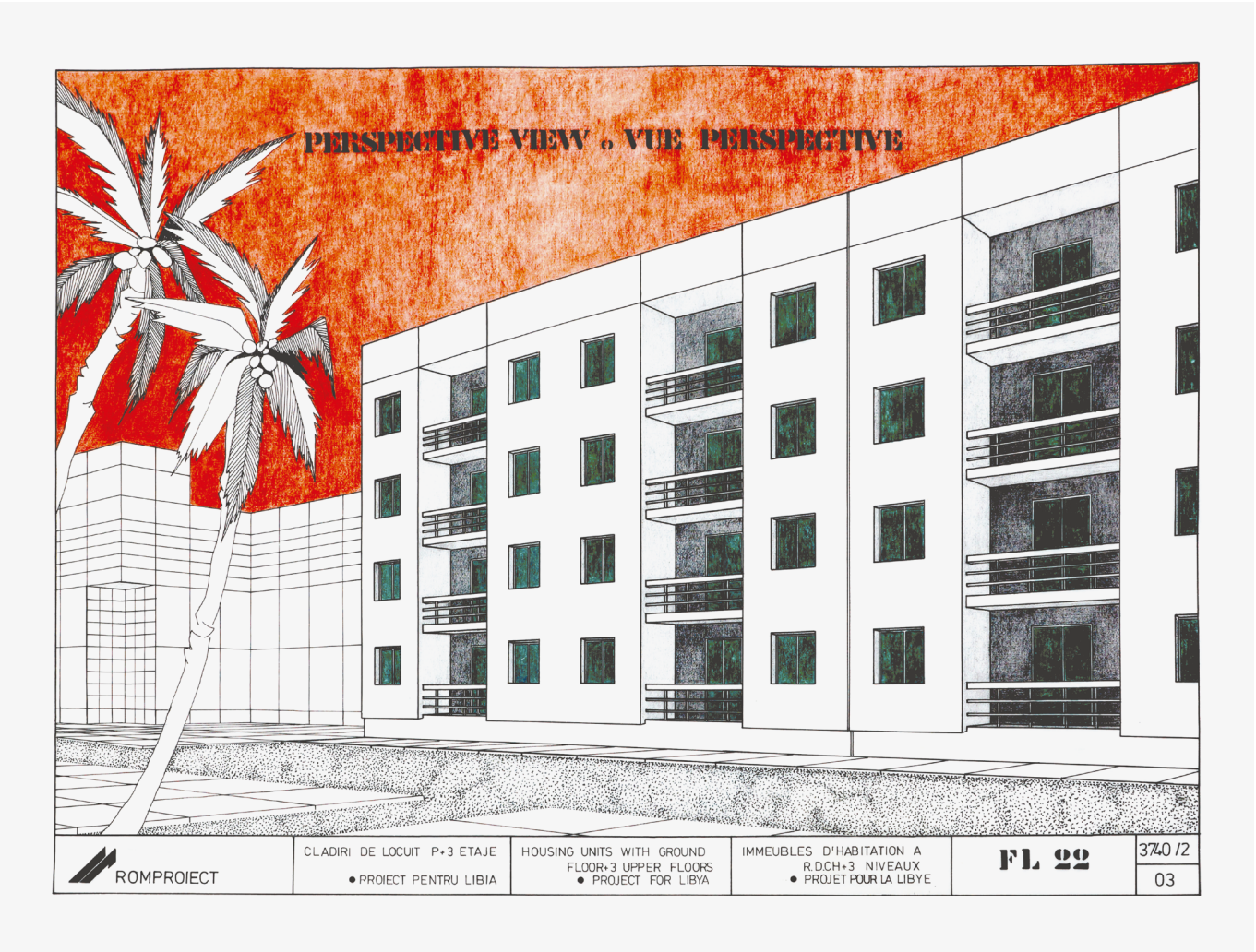
By imposing the lower exchange rate of the dollar (or dinar) on Miastoprojekt, Polservice secured the funding for additional Polish experts who would be in charge of the survey and recruited from a number of different scientific institutions across Poland. In other words, when competing with western companies in Iraq, Polservice benefitted from its monopolist position as a foreign trade organisation, since it was able to decide on the exchange rates of transactions that took place between itself and other organisations in Poland – a dynamic that impacted the conditions of work of the Polish team in Iraq and the conditions of their collaboration with their Iraqi counterparts.

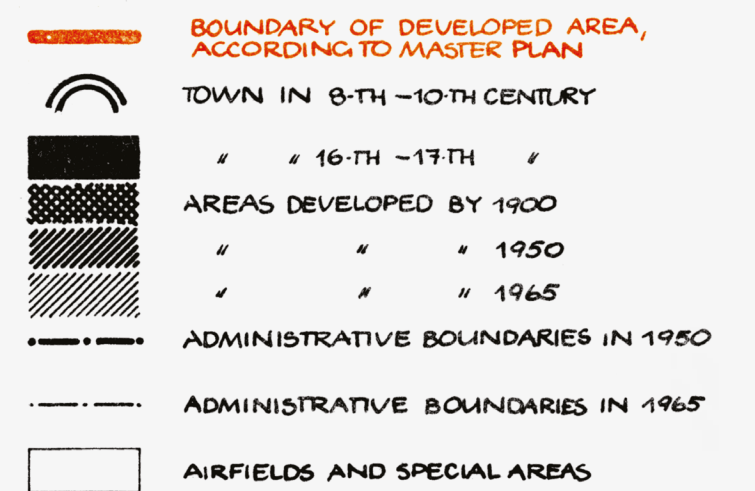
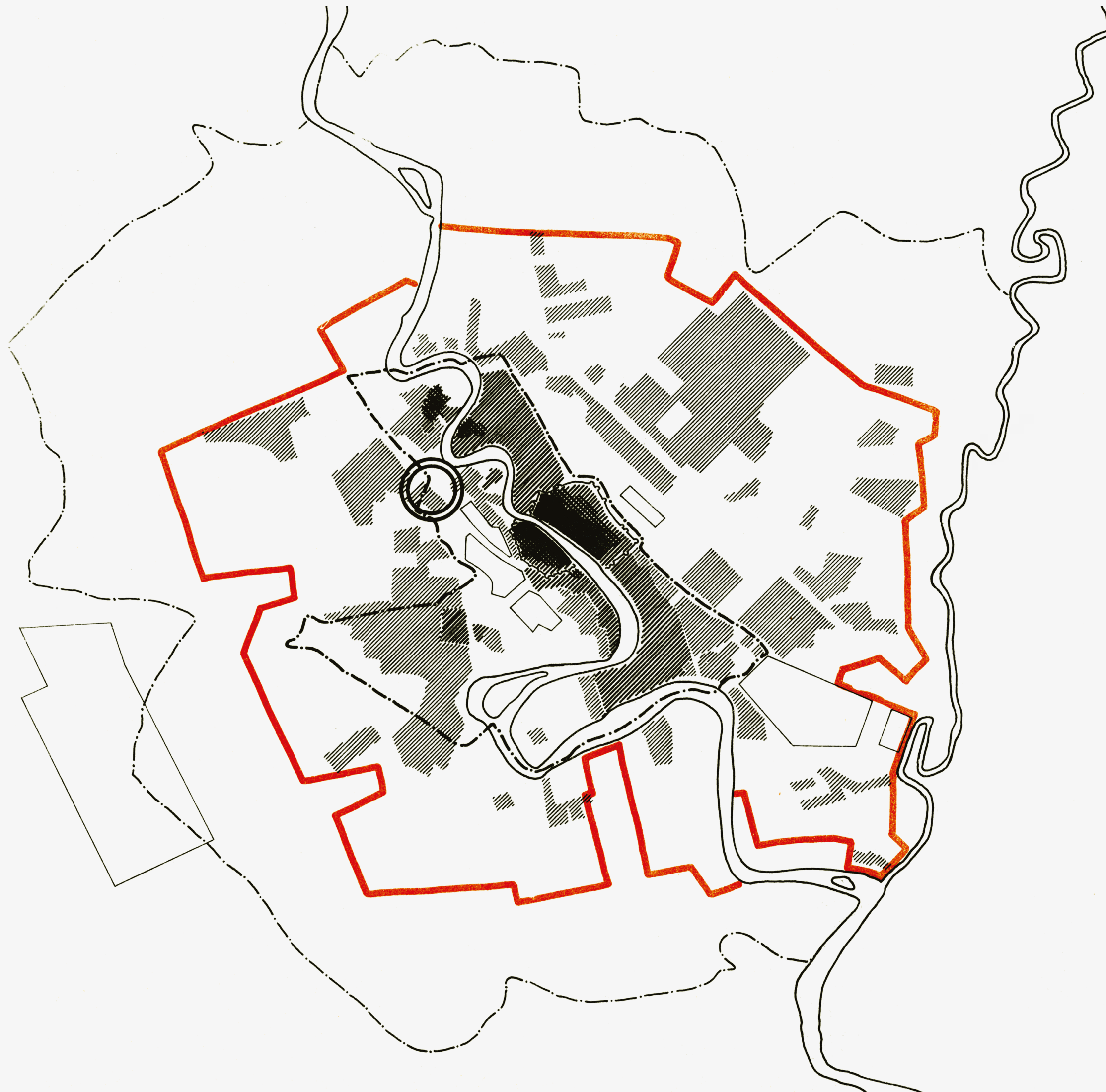
The agreement with the Municipality of Baghdad allocated significant labour power to the urban survey and resulted in an empirical understanding of the city. For instance, the survey included the first systematic study of its traffic – information that then fed into the production of the new masterplan and enabled it to be much more detailed than the one produced by British planners just ten years earlier.¹¹ Furthermore, the agreement engendered a consultative way of working. Iraqi planners were trained by the Polish team, and Polish planners worked at the Municipality. That too differed from the British plan. But maybe the most striking difference between the two proposals were their sizes. The contrast between the 23 pages of the British plan and the four volumes of the Miastoprojekt one stemmed from the latter’s mode of presentation. Unlike the former, which presented a set of definitive decisions, the latter documented the planning process itself and evidenced each step.

Miastoprojekt’s need to evidence its decisions resulted from the lower prestige afforded to the Polish planners in Baghdad compared with their British predecessors, which reflected the fact that Iraqi professional elites of the 1960s and 1970s were typically trained in the West, notably Britain.¹² But this way of working also reflected the vulnerability of the Polish planners vis-à-vis their own state leadership, which was eager to gain convertible currency and, by extension, the weakness of their position with respect to their Iraqi commissioners. This vulnerable status was also conveyed by their contracts with Polservice, which obliged the experts to reimburse the organisation for any additional expenses incurred were they to be dismissed by the client.¹³

BARTERING ARCHITECTURE

Like Polservice, other state-socialist exporters of design and construction services to Iraq followed the imperative of maximising their income in convertible currencies while minimising their expenditure of them at the same time. Many of their partners in Africa and Asia shared this imperative. Accordingly, since the early 1960s both Eastern Europeans and their counterparts tended to privilege bartering transactions, which allowed them to





avoid expending convertible currencies.¹⁴ By the late 1970s, the debt crisis in Eastern Europe only strengthened the interest among state-socialist regimes in exchanges of this kind. In the case of Iraq, barter agreements allowed Eastern European countries to obtain Iraqi crude oil while saving the convertible currencies that they needed to fund the repayment of foreign loans.

No country insisted more on such petrobarter agreements than Romania. Romanian state design and construction companies, including Arcom and Romproiect, worked on the principle of petrobarter across North Africa and the Middle East throughout the 1970s and the 1980s. In exchange for oil, these companies delivered a wide range of turnkey projects, including industrial plants and large-scale housing estates. Some of these were designed by Romanian architects, but many were based on third-party designs that were then redrawn so that they could be built and sold using materials, technology and labour in exchange for crude oil. This redrawing procedure was called ‘technological adaptation’, and aimed to maximise the competitive advantages that Romanian firms could offer by way of petrobarter agreements. One such advantage was the cheap labour of Romanian workers.

Among many examples of this technological adaptation is the industrial slaughterhouse project in Baghdad, designed by the East German design institute Industrieprojektierung, or Ipro, from Dessau. Ipro designed the facility to be built using a sophisticated prefabrication system, which was a hallmark of the East German construction industry at the time. The Romanian architects, however, technologically adapted the proposal. They redrew the prefabricated elements so that the buildings could instead be cast in-situ by Romanian workers, who were housed next to the construction site. Only smaller concrete elements were prefabricated in the end. With the exception of the cement and steel, of which Iraqis were in charge, all other construction materials for the project were brought from Romania.¹⁵

Technological adaptation was supported by specific design tools that were implemented by Romanian companies for their commissions in Iraq and the wider region. Among these tools were type designs, which were used to construct numerous buildings on the basis of the same blueprint with few, if any, alterations made for each individual site. These units would be delivered with fitted kitchens and bathrooms, and sometimes even fully furnished. Much of the equipment was delivered from Romania, while more sophisticated products were bought from the West. This model of planning extended from individual buildings to whole neighbourhoods, and Romproiect’s catalogues also included plan types for hotels, supermarkets, restaurants, kindergartens, schools and sports facilities.¹⁶

Commissions of this kind exploited the advantages of petrobarter, but in so doing they also testified to the fact

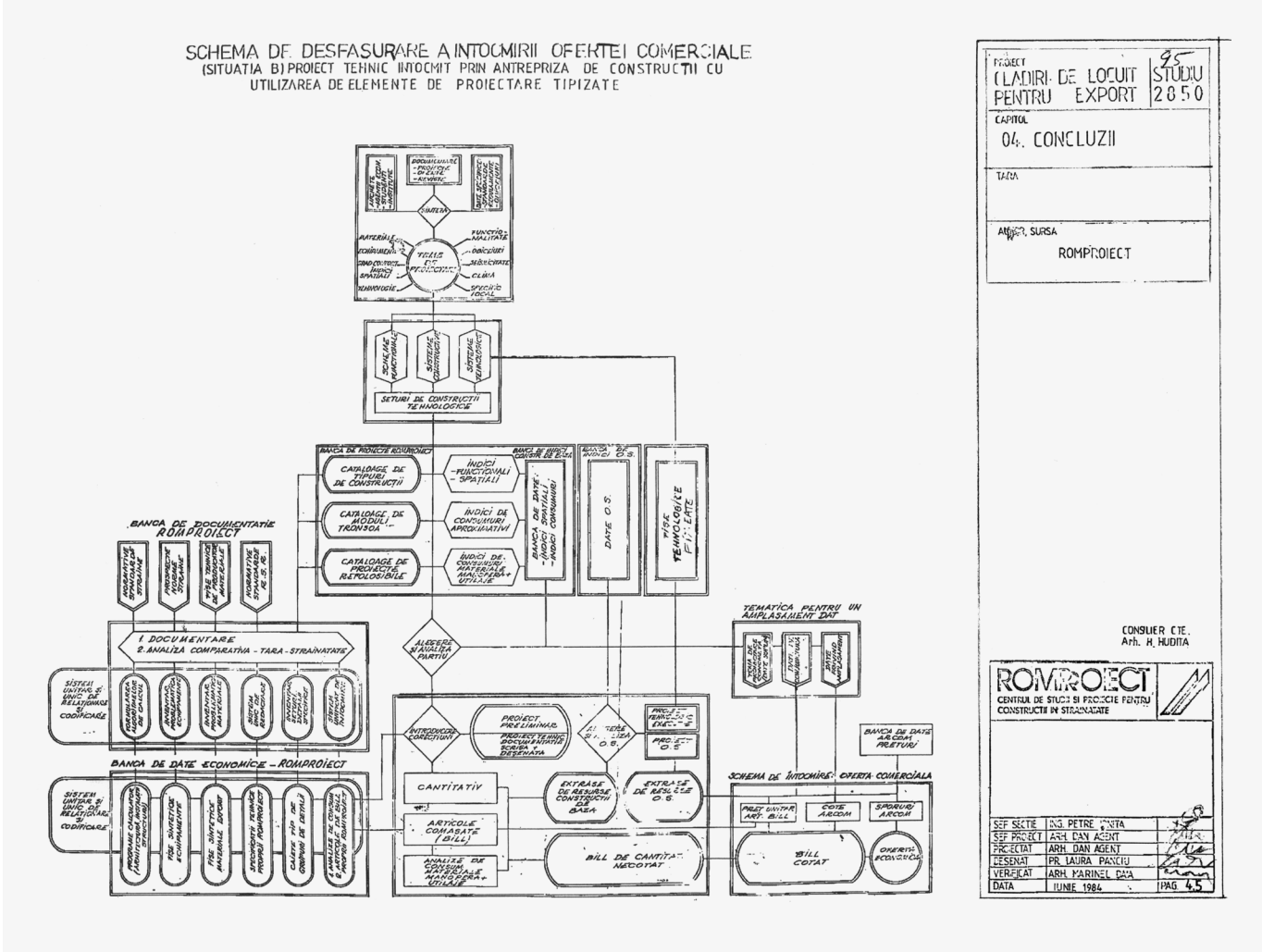
that the ‘exploitation’ driving these exchanges included the exploitation of Romania’s own population as well. When interviewed today, Romanian architects often recall that they resisted going to the North African construction sites, where they would typically be housed in camps far away from cities with little else to do but work. The contrast between their experience and that of the Polish planners in Baghdad, for whom the work in Iraq was both financially and professionally attractive, was stark.

LIMINAL POSITIONALITY

The architects, planners and managers of state-socialist design and construction companies in Cold War Iraq worked in a liminal position. They were situated between the western-dominated international market for design and construction services on the one hand and, on the other, the political economy of foreign trade under socialism, characterised as it was by the inconvertibility of Eastern European currencies and the privileging of the principle of barter. Here, they faced openings that they tried to exploit and risks that they tried to avoid, and the negotiations of this political economy impacted their ways of working. One example was the labour-intensive survey of Baghdad, which facilitated an evidence-based character of the planning process. In turn, petrobarter exchanges strongly incentivised the use of certain construction materials and technologies over others. At the same time, the ability to exploit these openings was unequally distributed among the various state-socialist actors involved, evident in the uneven relationship of power between Polservice and Miastoprojekt. Professionals in various socialist regimes also had different positions within this dynamic, as exemplified by the contrasting attitudes shown towards the work in Iraq by Polish planners and Romanian architects.

There may be two lessons that can be drawn from this story, beyond those that apply to the specific context of Iraq. Conceptually, a focus on state-socialist architectural mobilities allows us to rethink architecture’s globalisation without reducing it to the consequences of colonialism and global capitalism – and yet, by pointing at the uneven and unequal relationships that existed between the state-socialist actors and their western counterparts, this perspective does not neglect the hegemony of the colonial-capitalist core. Methodologically, therefore, the study of the liminality of Eastern European professionals who worked in Cold War Iraq offers a useful vantage point from which to understand the differences in architectural practices that unfolded under late-20th century capitalism and socialism.

These differences pertain less to ideologies, whether political or architectural, and more to the political economies of foreign trade. What emerges, then, is a history of how these political economies impacted the labour conditions of



mobile professionals during the final decades of the Cold War, as well as the conditions of their collaboration with their local counterparts and the material and technological vectors of the urbanisation processes that they inscribed on the ground.

First image: Romproiect (Romania), drawing for a housing project in Libya. Image courtesy of Arhivele Naționale ale României, Bucharest.
Second: Miastoprojekt-Kraków, map of the historical development of Baghdad produced as part of a masterplan for the city, 1967. Private archive, Kraków.
Third: Romproiect (Romania), diagram showing the development process of a design offer for export, 1984. Image courtesy of Arhivele Naționale ale României, Bucharest.

- 1 André Gunder Frank, ‘Long Live Transideological Enterprise!’, in *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 1, no 1, 1977, pp 91–140; Patrick Gutmann, ‘The East and Tripartite Industrial Cooperation in the Cold War Era’, in *Eastern European Economics* 49, no 2, 2011, pp 82–99; Besnik Pula, *Globalization Under and After Socialism* (Stanford University Press, 2018); and André Steiner, ‘The Globalisation Process and the Eastern Bloc Countries in the 1970s and 1980s’, in *European Review of History/Revue Européenne d’Histoire* 21, no 2, 2014, pp 165–181.
- 2 David Engerman, ‘The Second World’s Third World’, in *Kritika* 12, no 1, 2011, pp 183–212. See also James Mark, Artemy M Kalinovsky and Steffi Marung (eds), *Alternative Globalizations* (Indiana University Press, 2020); Oscar Sanchez-Sibony, *Red Globalization* (Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Łukasz Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism* (Princeton University Press, 2020).
- 3 Łukasz Stanek, ‘Socialist Worldmaking’, in *Urban Studies* 59, no 8, 2021, pp 1575–1596.
- 4 See Oscar Sanchez-Sibony op cit; and Jonathan Zatin, *The Currency of Socialism* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 5 See Oles M Smolansky, *The USSR and Iraq* (Duke University Press, 1991); and Massimiliano Trentin, ‘Tough Negotiations’, in *Cold War History* 8, no 3, 2008.
- 6 See Minoprio and Spencely and P W Macfarlane, ‘The Master Plan for the City of Baghdad’, London, 1956.
- 7 See Town Planning Office for the Master Plan of Baghdad, ‘Master Plan of Baghdad’, Baghdad, 1967; and ‘Comprehensive Development Plan for Baghdad 2000’, Baghdad, 1973. For discussion, see Łukasz Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism*, op cit.
- 8 See Kazimierz Bajer, ‘Sprawozdanie z przygotowań do umowy na opracowanie planu ogólnego Bagdadu oraz z rozmów organizacyjnych z Polservice i Grupą Warszawską’, Kraków, 1964–1965.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Stanisław Grzywnowicz and Jerzy Kiedrzyński, *Prawa i obowiązki specjalisty*, Warsaw, 1972, p 28.
- 11 See Town Planning Office for the Master Plan of Baghdad, ‘Comprehensive Development Plan for Baghdad 2000’, op cit.
- 12 Łukasz Stanek, ‘When Baghdad Was Like Warsaw’, in Daniel M Abramson, Zeynep Çelik Alexander and Michael Osman (eds), *Writing Architectural History* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021), pp 162–176.
- 13 See Stanisław Grzywnowicz and Jerzy Kiedrzyński, op cit.
- 14 See Oscar Sanchez-Sibony, op cit. See also Douglas Rogers, ‘Petrobarter’, in *Current Anthropology* 55, no 2, 2014; and Anne Dietrich, ‘Zwischen solidarischem Handel und ungleichem Tausch’, in *Journal für Entwicklungspolitik* 30, no 3, 2014.
- 15 The history of the industrial slaughterhouse can be reconstructed on the basis of the often fragmented documents from the Bundesarchiv in Berlin and the Arhivele Naționale in Bucharest. For discussion, see Łukasz Stanek, ‘Buildings for Dollars and Oil’, in *Contemporary European History* 30, no 4, 2021.
- 16 See Łukasz Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism*, op cit.

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