

**Stanek, L.: Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War.** Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2020. 357 p.

Many academic publications serve the understanding of capitalist versus socialist and North versus South relations during the Cold War. Beyond geographical and geopolitical works, the viewpoints of other disciplines may also be useful for geographers. The book of Łukasz STANEK, associate professor at Manchester School of Architecture (UK) deals with post-WWII global architecture, nesting the topic into the broader historical, political economical, and geographical context, through case studies from West Africa and the Middle East. By doing so, it also provides new aspects for understanding the global urbanization process.

The novelty of STANEK's work is enhanced not only by the fact that, beyond the two characteristic groups of architectural actors in postcolonial states (former colonizers and colonized nations), it draws attention to a third group formed by experts from socialist countries, but that it examines and presents these relations through the lens of the Global South. We get to know these actors primarily through the architecture they designed in postcolonial countries and their relationship with local actors. However, opportunities for these architects and planners to realize their visions were significantly affected by diverse geographical

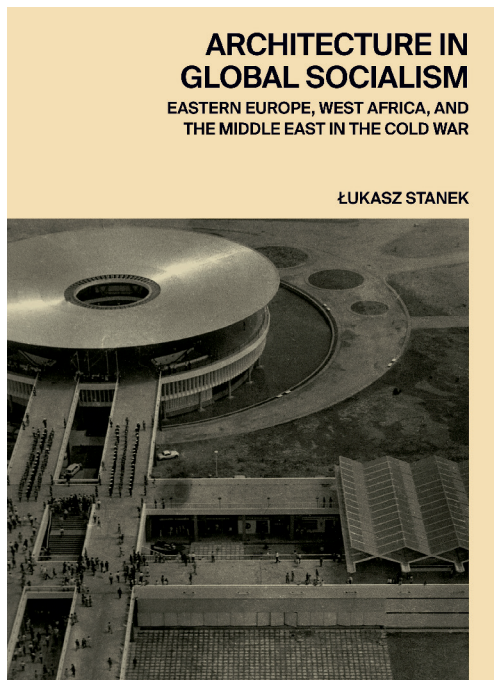
circumstances and changing political climate (i.e. the considerably different reception of socialism).

Studies on architectural mobilities, joint ventures and international cooperations among Eastern Europe, West Africa and the Middle East during the Cold War are scarce in Western literature. Even in the countries concerned, knowledge about collaboration has survived mainly in the archives and experts' recollections. Collecting, systematizing and analyzing these sources is a gap-filling work. STANEK's book also aims to develop a conceptual framework to better understand architecture and urbanization in the Global South.

During the Cold War, newly independent postcolonial countries, many of them members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), were trying to reduce their economic and political dependence on the former colonizers. The NAM countries' demand for greater independence met with the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's policy of socialist internationalism, which emphasized that the socialist bloc would provide help without exploiting these countries. Therefore, from the questions of housing and design-and-build of public buildings to the scale of urban planning, Eastern European professionals were welcome in NAM countries to share their knowledge. This was further enhanced by the narrative that Eastern European countries were claimed victims of semi-colonization by Western Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, meaning that they had also significantly left behind in the process of modernization. Hence, the involvement of Eastern European professionals fostered the idea of emancipation, at least in theory.

During the 1960s, the narrative of socialist internationalism was legitimized by the economic progress in the USSR based on scientific results and increasing social welfare. That time, Soviet-type planned economy seemed to be a well-functioning framework, and communist anticolonial rhetoric aroused sympathy in several countries of the Global South. Although numerous postcolonial countries were even hostile to the idea of socialism, they were interested in cooperating with the members of the Eastern Bloc, because their bargaining position seemed better than with the leading capitalist economies. In addition, since these countries had limited reserves of hard currency, they found favorable the barter agreements preferred by the USSR.

However, from the 1970s onwards, socialist countries started to increasingly consider postcolonial countries as suppliers of raw materials. The rhetoric of solidarity was, thus, replaced by the rhetoric of mutual benefit. The oil crises and growing public debts in COMECON countries forced these to export their



design-and-build services in exchange for crude oil. As state contractors often competed with each other, COMECON countries did not form a cohesive bloc from a Southern perspective. Consequently, relations with smaller countries from the Eastern Bloc did not appear to cause too much vulnerability, compared to their relations with the much stronger USSR.

As a result, various architectural mobilities took place in terms of scale, actors and contract types. The book focuses on the spatial and institutional relations among the main actors, notably individual architects, design institutes, state contractors, and foreign trade organizations (FTOs) that coordinated contracts. Through individual career paths, the reader gains insight into the architects' motivations (i.e. the reasons for working abroad) and opportunities (i.e. financial recognition and mobility limits compared to their Western counterparts). Similarly, we get an insight into the strategic goals of design institutes and state contractors. The author's declared aim is to analyze the mobility of the above mentioned actors, whom he calls the *vessels of architectural mobilities*. In addition, his book provides an overview of the mobility of other actors (e.g. administrators, managers, educators, foremen and workers) and a comparison of the narratives about mobility (whether it was rather the result of export contracts or directly served individual professional experience).

Lukasz STANEK examines whether architectural mobility from socialist countries has indeed brought antagonism and differentiation into urbanization in the Global South through the concept of "*worldmaking*" (based on the concept of "*mondialization*") (LEFEBVRE, H. 2009 [1978]; STANEK, Ł. 2011). According to this, a "world" is not only a piece of the Earth's surface delimited along spatial, social and economic characteristics, but "a 'social' or 'concrete' abstraction that becomes 'true in practice'" (p. 29) and becomes perceptible through diversity. STANEK's interpretation of worldmaking is "the production of the world from within its many, often antagonistic, options" (p. 30). In this context, "socialist worldmaking" was an existing reality, and it provided an alternative in the process of global urbanization. It created networks and interactions that influenced the development of postcolonial states.

Chapters 2 to 5 show in detail how path-dependency caused by Western colonizers was differentiated as a result of socialist worldmaking. Chapter 2 ("*A Global Development Path*") illustrates the direct spread of the socialist path in the 1950 and 1960s through the example of Accra. For Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana, planned economy and one-party system seemed to be suitable for realizing decolonization and modernization, as well as to achieve his ambitions of pan-African leadership. The Ghana National Construction Company started cooperating with architects from the Soviet Union and

other contractors from the Eastern Bloc. For Ghana, the main motivation for cooperation was to fill the gap of local experts and to reduce the country's dependence on the West, while partners from the USSR followed Khrushchev's policy toward postcolonial states along the official claims of "fraternal assistance" and "peaceful coexistence." Although the Soviet housing plans presented in the book chapter have not been materialized, the author does not interpret that as a failure, rather as an attempt of the translation of Soviet technologies into different climatic and cultural conditions. According to contemporary narratives, this effort was legitimized by the modernization of the USSR's Central Asian cities. However, the adaptation was ambiguous. While prefabricated elements of the buildings were adapted to the local needs of shading, ventilation and earthquake protection, no attention was paid to the cultural roots of future inhabitants. The layout of housing estates forcefully promoted the socialist way of life.

In the case of the International Trade Fair, finished in 1967, one year after Nkrumah was toppled, there was no direct spread of socialism. Eastern European experts were motivated by the professional challenges of tropical architecture. Yet, only marginal reports appeared in prominent Western architectural literature about the spectacular investment, which can be seen as an imprint of Cold War relations.

In summary, although the geopolitical importance of West Africa was not so great, it served as a testing ground for the Eastern Bloc to realize Global Socialism. At the same time, limited freedom and opportunities of actors had a noticeable impact on "socialist worldmaking."

Chapter 3 ("*Worlding Eastern Europe*") takes the reader to Nigeria in the 1970s. Although the country's political leadership was hostile to socialism, contracts with COMECON companies were signed to diversify international actors. Socialist countries were open to such agreements, because they expected crude oil from the Western African country. The legitimacy of their presence was ensured by the narrative of transferring the experience gained during the elimination of underdevelopment in Eastern Europe.

The first case study is especially close to us, as it deals with the Hungarian architect Charles Polónyi. According to Polónyi, conditions in rural Hungary in the 1950s did not differ much from those in post-colonial countries one or two decades later. Based on former studies and articles of the CIAM East group (a regional subdivision of International Congresses of Modern Architecture, formed by Central European architects), he drew attention to the structure of Hungarian market towns, where the implementation of traditional forms of urban fabric by using modern tools can ensure efficient functional operation. He was involved too in regional planning in Ghana (Bui Study), then in Nigeria (Survey and Development

Plan for Calabar). He utilized his previous experiences of the Balaton Plan and Mohács Island Plan, plans that had been designed with a focus on specific regions of Hungary. Meanwhile, he never emphasized links between his plans for African countries and either Hungary or the socialist system, rather the use of international principles and methods in architecture.

The next two case studies also show how previous responses to peripherality were reconsidered, and how concepts and techniques were translated into the Western African context. Zbigniew Dmochowski made significant efforts on the decolonization and emancipation of traditional Nigerian architecture, using the methods of architectural typification applied in Poland. With his work, he also helped lay the foundations for the modern school of architecture in Nigeria. As for the construction of the International Trade Fair (ITF) in the Western African country, it “brought Yugoslavia into Lagos.” As a co-owner and technical partner of the Nigerian Engineering and Construction Company, the Yugoslavian Energoprojekt supplied a team of experts, with the purpose of developing the local construction industry as well. Finally, the emancipatory aims nearly went lost, so according to local opinions, Energoprojekt exploited them similarly to Western companies. However, the project did not become totally controversial, as the ITF provided acceptable solutions to urbanization challenges in Lagos.

Chapter 4 (“*The World Socialist System*”) takes us to the Middle East. *Worldmaking* already appears as a practice of international trade, in the framework of the *world socialist system* (YAGODOVSKY, L. 1975). We read about the relationship between COMECON and affiliated countries through the examples of Iraqi urban planning and architectural projects. The Baath regime designated a “non-capitalist” development for Iraq (as a “socialist Arab state”), which reinforced cooperation with Eastern European contractors. For COMECON member states, the emphasis was on “mutual benefit” in foreign trade, which was expected to eliminate the dichotomy between raw material producing countries and industrially developed countries, originating from colonial times. After the oil crisis of 1973, Eastern European countries became increasingly interested in exporting design-and-build procedures, as they were able to incorporate these as “salable” products into petrobarter agreements.

The Polish contractor Miastoprojekt had a leading role in creating the Baghdad Comprehensive Development Plan. Miastoprojekt’s position was legitimized by its eminent role in the post-WWII reconstruction of cities in Poland. However, it had to successfully compete with Western design offices during the tender process. A main reason for its success as a large socialist company was its capacity to involve a large number of employees to carry out multi-scale studies, and to elaborate possible scenarios in a largely consultative manner. The cooperation later continued

within the framework of the General Housing Project for Iraq. However, Iraqi expectations diverged in the late 1970s, driven by cultural considerations. The aim of Iraqi leaders was to represent and regain the former greatness of Baghdad, that required significantly different architectural solutions than the modernist plans of Miastoprojekt. Finally, other companies were invited to develop a new vision for Iraqi urbanization.

As another remarkable case, the story of Baghdad’s abattoir reveals the anomalies of economic harmonization among socialist states. The conflict between the general contractor from the German Democratic Republic and the subcontractor from Romania was even politically embarrassing, as it undermined the credibility of the whole COMECON.

By the end of the Cold War, not much remained from the original emancipatory discourse. Still, the *world socialist system* has not become a failed project of globalizing architecture, as the Middle East served as a testing ground for socialist contractors to respond to expectations in the international market.

Chapter 5 (“*Socialism within Globalization*”) expands the focus to the Persian Gulf, as a paradigmatic place of architecture’s globalization. It highlights that actors from socialist countries were not negligible in this process. To ensure their position, they presented their previous experiences in Africa and the Middle East as evidence of their ability to adapt to Western norms. They have successfully deterritorialized and reterritorialized those experiences. Although they were no longer competitive in technology, their design services could be sold profitably, as “intellectual and immaterial export.” As traditional urban structures were drastically overwritten during the modernization of the cities in the Persian Gulf, dissatisfaction was emerging by the 1980s. Mediation, i.e. the reconciliation of modernism and Arab culture has become necessary.

The contract between the local Tayeb Engineering and the Bulgarian Technoexportstroy (TES) for the Municipal and Town Planning Department in Abu Dhabi was based on the fact that TES provided Western type organizational culture, financing practices and technical solutions, and at the same time, the proposed plan met the elite’s expectations in the United Arab Emirates. They used modern elements, prefabricated panels and flexible modular systems, in parallel with traditional forms, where the characteristic motifs on the building can be read as cultural references. In addition, the whole complex was visually well-suited to the wider urban development plans.

The examples of individual architects’ carriers in Kuwait give us an insight into the significantly changed practice of architectural mobilities. Individual contracts through FTOs became common, and many professionals arrived directly to private companies. Their level of mobility and professional freedom was much greater than those of expatriate architects in the 1960 and 1970s. They could gain professional skills that were still

not accessible in their home country. As a result, when many of them returned to Eastern Europe in the years the socialist bloc collapsed, they had the opportunity to transfer international experience to their homeland.

While in the 1960 and 1970s “*thinking Baghdad through Warsaw*” was typical in architectural mobilities, after the collapse of socialist regimes “*thinking Sofia through Abi Dhabi*” has become dominant. In the meantime, some successors of contractors in former socialist countries have managed to maintain their activities abroad in a path-dependent manner, based on their previously gained positions.

At the end of the book, the reader gets an insight into the diverse research methods and sources STANEK applied. Research sites included national archives, document repositories of different organizations and societies, and the private collections of individual actors. In addition, he examined relevant publications from scientific journals and the daily press, as well as propagande materials. The case studies are based on a large number of interviews and discussions. The author took into account the context in which the illustrations were previously published, and collided these often contradictory sources to make the case studies transnational and situated.

All together, the chapters of the book provide a nuanced view on socialist worldmaking in an ever-changing environment. Their novelty is the recalibrated perspective, or in other words, “the view from the South” on the architectural mobility from socialist countries. STANEK does not define what architecture is in a normative way, but collects all the activities that were connected to the protagonists of the book, and the frameworks in which architectural mobility was realized. Thereby he reconceptualizes architecture as part of the global urbanization process. The constant change and the contradictions around *socialist labor* causes “the main dilemma of this book: the relationship between the studied architectures and the project of socialism” (p. 305.). Based on an idea from an interview, STANEK writes: “the Cold War appears as a clockwork mechanism in which cogs of antagonistic worldmaking projects sometimes gnashed and ground, and sometimes complemented each other to mutually productive effect” (p. 33.). Although the reader meets a number of failed or heavily criticized projects, the book goes far beyond them, and “contributes to a more heterogeneous and antagonistic historiography of global urbanization and its architecture” (p. 4).

GÁBOR TOLNAI<sup>1</sup>

## REFERENCES

- LEFEBVRE, H. 2009 [1978]. The worldwide experience. In *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*. Eds.: BRENNER, N. and ELDEN, S., Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 263–278.
- STANEK, Ľ. 2011. *Henri Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research and the Production of Theory*. Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press.
- YAGODOVSKY, L. 1975. *The World Socialist System: Its Role in the World Today*. Moscow, Novosti Press Agency.

<sup>1</sup> ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Science, Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, Department of Social and Economic Geography, Budapest, Hungary. E-mail: gabor.tolnai@ttk.elte.hu