

Postmodern Architecture and Political Change – Poland and Beyond

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Over the last ten years, the classic historiography of postmodern discourse in architecture has been significantly „provincialized“. In contrast to Fredric Jameson’s account that offered the unilinear history of ‘postmodernism’ as a product of „late capitalism“ (1991), contemporary scholars have pointed out its heterogeneity.¹ Conceiving postmodernism as an international yet situated meaning-making practice, they showed that it was not constrained exclusively to North America and Western Europe, but effectively straddled „the Iron Curtain“, obscuring the pre-supposed centre-periphery dichotomy. In particular, research around architectural debates and practices in state socialism have become one of the grounds where theories of „postmodern architecture“ are currently challenged and re-examined.² The conference aimed to continue such re-thinking of postmodernism.

The first cluster of presentations dealt with the topic of legibility of postmodernist ideas and media technologies that made their global proliferation possible. In the keynote lecture, LEA-CATHERINE SZACKA (Manchester) reminded that exhibitions, itinerant displays and print media such as catalogues served as a primary means for the circulation of postmodernist statements in Italy, France and the USA. Tracing the history of iterations of the paradigmatic exhibition „La Strada Novissima“ in Venice (1980), Paris (1981), and San Francisco (1982), Szacka illustrated that the exhibition produced different strands for theoretical debate rather a unified manifesto. While the first Venetian version put forward various theoretical propositions ranging from historicism, irony and communication, to vernacular architecture, the French event focused on the specific questions of scale and urbanity. The American edition, in contrast, was envisioned as a public educational project whose consumption went beyond the narrow con-

finer of the architectural „elite“. As Szacka noted, due to the advancement of information and communication technologies in the 1970s–80s, these events and discussions were mainly perceived indirectly – namely, through footage and publications.

Circulations of media and information technologies were equally present within most socialist countries, which saw the regular supply of architectural magazines, original publications and translations that made various fragments of the postmodernist discourse available for a wider community of architectural practitioners and critics. However, such travels were largely asymmetrical as parallel developments in the Socialist Bloc remained almost completely illegible to Euro-American audiences.

According to EMILIA KIECKO (Wrocław), the Exhibitions of International Architecture Terra-1 (1975) and Terra-2 (1981), held at the Museum of Architecture in Wrocław, exemplified such overlooked technologies of international mediation from Communist Poland. The events gathered contributions from local artists, architects and theorists, such as Natalia LL and Zbigniew Gadek, along with foreign participants — Superstudio, Rem Koolhaas and others — creating an international platform for the expression of common professional concerns in regards to such topic as environmental crisis, mass housing design and participatory methods in planning.

The maintenance of such large-scale platforms for the mediation of international dis-

¹ Lidia Klein, P1 Postmodernizm polski Architektura i urbanistyka, Stowarzyszenie 40 000 Malarzy, 2013.

² Alex Bykov / Ievgeniia Gubkina, Soviet Modernism. Brutalism. Post-Modernism. Buildings and Projects in Ukraine 1960–1990, Kyiv 2019; Alicja Gzowska / Lidia Klein (eds.), P2. Postmodernizm polski. Architektura i urbanistyka, Stowarzyszenie 40 000 Malarzy, 2013; Lidia Klein, P1 Postmodernizm polski Architektura i urbanistyka, Stowarzyszenie 40 000 Malarzy, 2013; Maroš Krivý, Postmodernism or Socialist Realism? The Architecture of Housing Estates in Late Socialist Czechoslovakia, in: Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 75 (2016) 1, pp. 74–101; Max Hirsh, Intelligentia Design and the Postmodern Plattenbau, in: Kenny Cupers (ed.), Use Matters: An Alternative History of Architecture, London 2013, pp. 169–182; Vladimir Kulic (ed.), Second World Postmodernisms: Architecture and Society under Late Socialism, London 2019; Łukasz Stanek, Postmodernism is Almost All Right: Polish Architecture After Socialist Globalization, Warszawa 2013.

cussions in state socialism was fragile as it relied on patronage and steady financial aid from the central governments. As Kiecko observed, the Terra-2 exhibition coincided with significant political upheaval in Poland — the Solidarity movement — that was locally suppressed in 1981 at risk of the Soviet intervention. Such change, and the following introduction of the martial law, made it difficult to continue working on the projects that promoted reformist ideas: Terra was thus subsequently shut down.

GRUIA BADESCU (Konstanz) confirmed Kiecko's argument that the overall geopolitical climate affected the circulation of postmodernist ideas and it could thus significantly vary across the Socialist Bloc. Badescu juxtaposed the architectural community of Ceausescu's Romania — completely isolated from postmodernist discourse during the 1980s — to the Yugoslavian community that, in turn, saw a wide range of translations of foreign theoretical works and actively took part in the development of international debates. The flow of information in the socialist architectural practice, Badescu added, forged the circulation of its own and often contained ideas such as socialist realism. Its relationship to postmodernist discourse is itself a point for further research.

Circulations within socialist internationalist networks were orchestrated by large-scale design institutes. As MICHAŁ WISNEWSKI (Krakow) showed, the institute Miastoprojekt (City project) participated in various local and internationalist networks, realising projects across Poland that ranged from churches to masterplans, as well as participated in international collaborations outside of the Socialist Bloc — in Nigeria, Iraq, and Ghana. The employees of the institute, for instance, the architect Tomasz Mankowski, had led very cosmopolitan careers that allowed them to compare and translate the experience of working in diverse cultures, climates, and economic systems back into Poland.³

Along with maintenance of international networks, the emergence of a new type of a client proofed as an equally important factor for proliferation of postmodernist ideas in state socialism. Taking Soviet Estonia of the 1970s–80s as a case-study, ANDREAS

KURG (Tallinn) mapped such new clientele: collective farms, cooperatives or individuals that were endorsed with government-provided plots of land and financial loans for construction. Focusing on the cases of single-family housing projects designed by the architects from the so-called „Tallinn School“, Kurg argued that the „postmodern architecture“ of the single-family homes exemplified a new type of consumption and class differentiation in the „late-Soviet“ society. The accumulation of capital in the hands of an individual client contradicted the collectivist principles of the socialist society, and provided architects an opening to seek and develop their own individual self-expressions — through experiments with architectural form and programme. These tendencies in Soviet Estonia, as Reinhold Martin previously pointed out, paradoxically contradicted one of the crucial stances of the postmodern condition — „the death of the author“ — and instead contributed to the formation of the first privatised architectural offices in the late 1980s.⁴

The second set of the conference presenters explored different forms of mobilisation of postmodernist rhetoric in state socialist architectural production. The possibility to reform complexes of industrially-prefabricated mass housing, as well as broader critique of technocratic elites were of particular interest to Polish designers. The architect and urban planner MAREK BUDZYŃSKI (Warsaw) revisited two of his unrealised housing projects — the Gornikow Miedziowych estate in Lublin and the Młodych Estate in Nowy Dwór Mazowiecki — from the 1970s. Both of these projects had proposed changes to the affirmative mass housing industry of the 1960s around aspects of the planning process, participation,

³ See also Łukasz Stanek, *Miastoprojekt goes abroad: the transfer of architectural labour from socialist Poland to Iraq (1958–1989)*, in: *The Journal of Architecture* 17 (2012) 3, pp. 361–386; Łukasz Stanek, *Mobilities of Architecture in the Global Cold War: From Socialist Poland to Kuwait and Back*, in: *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 4 (2015) 2, pp. 365–398; Łukasz Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War*, Princeton 2020.

⁴ Reinhold Martin, *A Postmodernist International?*, in: Vladimir Kulic (ed.), *Second World Postmodernisms: Architecture and Society under Late Socialism*, London 2019, pp. 226–235.

and particular spatial solutions. While preserving the mass panel production as a foundation for the construction of new cities, Budzynski, for example, through his projects, suggested the principle of „grouped parcellation“, which invited future residents of a housing estate to participate in the planning phase of the project.

BLAZEJ CIARKOWSKI (Lodz) referred to similar aspirations towards the „optimisation of prefabricated concrete slab systems“ among Lodz architectural community. According to Ciarkowski, such practitioners as Boleslaw Kardaszewski and Mirosław Wisniewski searched for a compromise between the modern technology of the mass-produced panel factory and the city's historical image through introduction of ornamentation and formal alteration of the mass-produced facades.

While Budzynski, Kardaszewski and Wisniewski argued for change within the system, „paper“ architects in Czechoslovakia, as MAROS KRIVY (Tallinn) demonstrated, used the postmodernist dictum to discredit the public housing program altogether. Krivy followed the re-publication of the iconic image of the demolition of the infamous Pruitt-Igoe estate in the USA from Charles Jencks' „Language of Postmodern Architecture“ into Czechoslovak samizdat publications and argued that it helped fuel the formation of anti-socialist imagery. Such iconoclasm was further amplified by means of exhibitions and magazines that repeatedly staged the demolition of mass housing in Czechoslovakia during the 1980s–90s. Krivy, therefore, proposed to consider „paper“ architecture as an actor who helped to normalise the upcoming neoliberal turn.

As the conference has shown, the uses of postmodernist discourse varied significantly across countries and regions analysed by the presenters. Situated in various contexts, postmodernist rhetoric could mean and project different, even contradictory, arguments. Postmodernist debates could also scale up and down – from the discussion of the reform of the panel housing construction to the district- or microrailon-level proposals and to the urban dimension. According to PIOTR MARCINIAK (Poznan), in the late 1970s Poland, the debates around the solution for mass

housing construction were joined by a critique of modernist principles in urban design, which had called for an escape from the machine-produced environment and to re-invent urban morphology based on an „improved system of streets and squares“. Marciniak argued that the translations of Charles Jencks and Kenneth Frampton „provided a theoretical foundation“ for the concepts and imaginaries of the reconstruction of the historical city centres of Elblag, Poznan and Szczecin. As ANDRZEJ LEDER (Warsaw) has demonstrated on the example of Warsaw, the traces of the post-WWII destruction, still widely present in Polish cities up until the 1980s, were an important cornerstone of such discussions.

The interest in ornamentation and notions of historicism in architectural and urban planning practice were likewise shared by the architects from Soviet Lithuania. As MARIJA DREMAITE (Vilnius) argued, the „desire to look postmodern“ exhibited by the young generation of Lithuanian architects active in the 1970s–80s could be interpreted as a pragmatic tool for positioning, self-differentiating and a subsequent promotion of aspiring professionals. This was a way to set them apart from the technocratic establishment of the Republic that was most active during the 1950s–60s, as well as with the older generation of practitioners that had started their careers in the inter-war period.

Traveling to Soviet Belarus, postmodernist discourse in architecture evoked a national imagery that distinguished the Republic from the broader „Soviet“ homogeneity. As OXANA GOURINOVITCH (Berlin and Weimar) argued, the aspiration towards decentralisation, and the assertion of nationhood could be achieved through locally-produced designs, such as the late phases of the construction of the State Musical Comedy Theatre in Minsk during the 1970s–80s. Through this building, argued Gourinovitch, „postmodern narratives ... found its way into Soviet architectural semantics“. Postmodern discourse was thus co-existing and hybridising with various tropes from socialist realism and socialist internationalism, exhibiting one of many possibilities for making architectural statements. Thus, in the state-socialist context, the analy-

sis of postmodern statement should be necessarily accompanied by a proportional attention to other discourses that prevailed in design practice.

Lastly, ANIA ENGLAND (Warsaw) contended that the possibility of employing postmodernist references in the former state-socialist country did not cease after the 1989 watershed. „Our God cannot be modernist,” – reads the commentary to a design of the Polish Basilica of Our Lady of Lichen, the biggest church in Europe, built during the catastrophic economic turbulence of the 1990s. Labelling this monumental and overly decorated structure in postmodernist terms, according to England, helps to „give meaning to a building that is otherwise left behind”. How is it possible that some meaning-making practices make sense, attract the public’s attention, funding, interest, and others – do not? To what extent can these „left behind” design practices speak on their own terms? Is such a possibility still dictated and defined by the Cold War semantic split? Perhaps, now it is a proper time to move beyond postmodernism and to do some conceptual work across this divide.

Conference overview:

Welcome address: Ruth Leiserowitz, Deputy Director, GHI Warsaw

Introduction: Błażej Brzostek, Florian Urban, Annika Wienert

Keynote Lecture

Léa-Catherine Szacka (Manchester): The Presence of the Past: From Centres to Peripheries

Session I – Poland

Chair: Marcin Zaremba (Warsaw)

Introduction: Marcin Zaremba (Warsaw)

Emilia Kiecko (Wrocław): The Meaning of Postmodernism in Light of the International Exhibitions of Intentional Architecture „Ter-ra”

Marek Budzyński (Warsaw): Niezrealizowane projekty z lat 80-ych: Osiedle Górników Miedziowych w Lubinie i Osiedle Młodych w Nowym Dworze Mazowieckim [Unrealized projects from the 1980s: the Górników Miedzio-

wych Estate in Lubin and the Młodych Estate in Nowy Dwór Mazowiecki]

Session II – East Germany, Romania, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia

Chair: Arnold Bartetzky (Leipzig)

Tobias Zervosen (Munich): Building History. The GDR’s Postmodernism

Gruia Badescu (Konstanz): Golden Era, Iron Gates: Postmodern Architecture and Political Transformation in 1980s Romania and Yugoslavia

Maroš Krivý (Tallinn): Boom, Boom, Boom

Session III – The Soviet West

Chair: Felix Ackermann (Warsaw)

Andres Kurg (Tallinn): Estonians on the Scaffoldings: Ethnicity, Class and Single-Family Housing in Late-Socialism

Marija Drėmaitė (Vilnius): The Desire to Look Postmodern: Lithuanian Architecture of the Final Soviet Decade, 1979–1989

Oxana Gourinovitch (Berlin): National Theatre. The State Theatre of Musical Comedy in Minsk

Public Round Table Discussion: Architektura postmodernistyczna i zmiana polityczna [Postmodern Architecture and Political Change]

Welcome Note: Miloš Řezník, Director, GHI Warsaw

Chair: Anna Cymer (Warsaw)

Panelists:

Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński, Politechnika Warszawska (Warsaw)

Maria Lubocka-Hoffmann, former General Conservator of Elbląg

Maciej Miłobędzki, JEMS Architects (Warsaw)

Ewa Porębska, Architektura Murator (Warsaw)

Keynote Lecture

Andrzej Leder (Warsaw): Unconscious Design of the City Space. The Case of Warsaw

Session IV – Postmodern Architecture and the

City

Chair: Léa-Catherine Szacka (Manchester)

Piotr Winskowski (Kraków): The Postmodernisation of Polish Architecture

Piotr Marciniak (Poznań): Postmodernism and New Urban Concepts in Poland

Błażej Ciarkowski (Łódź): Art Nouveau and Large Panel System-Building? Postmodern Architecture and Prefabrication in Łódź

Session V – Postmodern Architecture before and after 1989

Chair: Annika Wienert (Warsaw)

Michał Wiśniewski (Kraków): Tomasz Mańkowski and Brutalist Influences on Postmodern Architecture in Kraków

Ania England (Poznań): The Other Postmodernism of the Basilica of Our Lady of Licheń

Closing Remarks and Wrap-up Discussion

Chairs: Błażej Brzostek, Florian Urban, Annika Wienert

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