



Field Note the EAHN Thematic Conference 'States in Between: Architecture and Empire in East Europe and North Eurasia'

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At the EAHN Thematic Conference 'States in Between: Architecture and Empire in East Europe and North Eurasia' in Helsinki in June 2023, scholars gathered to discuss the state of the field in the face of Russian aggression and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This article is an overview of the discussions and their background.

Keywords: EAHN conferences; Ukraine; Soviet Union; Russian Empire; coloniality; de-colonization



Motivation

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 threw world politics into flux. Russia's aggressive expansionism and outspoken imperialism that sought to undermine its smaller neighbours' voice and independence took most people by surprise. How was this possible? How did we not see it coming? For many of us studying the history and culture of these areas, this was a moment of self-reflection. With entire cities and regions transformed by war's violent destruction and by massive fortification works, with monuments toppled and re-erected and the rhetorics of reconstruction saturating the architectural discourses on both sides, built environments and architecture play a bigger role than simply a backdrop. They often figure as key instruments or elements at stake in the conflict. Considering the region's history, these dynamics seem anything but novel. Nevertheless, it was evident that not enough questions had been raised about the relation of built environments and architecture to imperialism and empire building. It appeared that getting together at a conference was important for making sense of them.

The thirteenth EAHN Thematic Conference, 'States in Between: Architecture and Empire in East Europe and North Eurasia' (Helsinki, June 7–11, 2023), was organised and its thematic framework conceived as a direct and immediate reaction to the full-scale invasion and the urgencies it highlighted (**Figure 1**). Usually, an EAHN Thematic Conference of this kind needs to be proposed two years in advance. However, in this



Figure 1: Conference in session on June 8 2023, in the Porthania building of the University of Helsinki, designed by Arne Ervi. Photograph by Michał Murawski.

instance, a prompt response was possible since, shortly before the invasion, a thematic conference to revise the histories of Soviet architectures was granted for St. Petersburg. From the original organising team — Vadim Bass, Andres Kurg, and myself — of that initial conference, it was left to me to reconsider the plans and the feasibility of diverting them. The call for papers was announced at the EAHN biennial conference in Madrid in June 2022, where the plenary roundtable ‘Voices from Ukraine: War, Heritage, and Reconstruction’ was convened as a preamble to the future conference (see Dyak 2023 in this same journal for one outcome of that roundtable).

The intent of the new conference was to register and re-evaluate the state of research, as well as to activate the network to offer a space for engagement and solidarity at a moment of crisis. It set out to reframe the field by rethinking the questions and contexts in which we study architecture and by creating a comparative setting to offer a new perspective on the study of architecture across broad geographic and temporal expanses that had been shaped by the imperial ambitions of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The phrase ‘states in between’ in the conference title acted as a rubric for the tensions of geographic areas, the various nuances of exchange, and the impacts on culture, ideology, and politics as well as on ethnic, social, class, and gender identities.

Helsinki was fitting as the location. Built in its current form as the capital of the Grand Duchy of Finland after the area’s annexation by Russia, and heavily bombed by the Soviet air force during the Second World War, the city has been shaped by and stood against both Russian imperial rule as well as Soviet aggression. The National Archives of Finland, the National Library of Finland, and the University of Helsinki, all important institutions in the history of shaping Finnish identities under the constant influence of a more powerful neighbour, opened their doors to host the event. An active and engaged scientific committee, comprising Christina Crawford, Sofia Dyak, Andres Kurg, Mari Lending, Michał Murawski, and Carmen Popescu, was instrumental in the development of the conference’s intellectual framework.

Precedents

I approach the historiographies within which the conference operates as a historian of art and architecture whose work has focused on early Soviet history, and to a lesser extent, on histories of the Russian Empire. At the same time, having gone to schools and finished my BA in Helsinki, I am familiar with the Finnish narratives of national history. Seen from this disciplinary vantage point, the conference builds, in its broad ambitions to decentre and decolonise the studies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, on historical research that has sought to question the centre-periphery structures and to critically approach the question of empire-building in these geographies. Such a

decentred perspective that focuses on the multi-ethnic character of the empire and the forging of national identities within the empire rather than simply the ambitions of its central governance has slowly become commonplace, even if not always mainstream, in the field of Slavonics since the 1990s (e.g. Suny 1988; Kappeler 1992; Slezkine 1994; Khalid 1998; Snyder 2003). These narratives have given a voice and visibility to the smaller nations of the Russian and Soviet empires and have shown how not only are such nations important to study in their own right but also to understand the bigger picture in which they exist. In the wake of such scholarship, urban histories of cities like Kyiv (Bilenky 2018) or Tashkent (Sahadeo 2007; Stronski 2010) changed the way the role of the construction and culture of cities in such ‘peripheries’ is understood for the culture and development of the broader empires. The same is true for studies of Russian literature and culture, where a critical framework of empire has been applied and debated for a long time (Layton 1994; Greenleaf and Moeller-Sally 1998; Khalid 2000; Shkandrij 2001; Ram 2003).

Although such individual studies have been around for some time, as have, in parallel with them, local histories of national narratives, only now are calls for the de-centring and de-colonisation of Slavonic studies becoming mainstream. In most studies, Russian culture and its central narrative have overshadowed and obscured the voices of the fringes — well illustrated, for example, by the unfortunate term ‘Russian avant-garde’, a historiographic label and marketing brand that has absorbed an essentially multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-national phenomenon for the benefit of the centre. There have also been attempts to map the relationships between architecture and nation-building in the area, but they have focused explicitly on Russian identities (Cracraft and Rowland 2003). In contrast, histories of the borderlands have most often remained in the borderlands, isolated by their own perspectives, language, and networks — or the lack of them. Sometimes they have been dictated by the centre, making their own voice undetectable, which was typical in particular for the Soviet period, which Richard Anderson (2024) highlights in his fieldnote sparked by the Helsinki conference and published in this same journal.

Other labels, such as Eastern European or Eurasian studies, have done a lot to level the field, and create a critical discourse on the role of the so-called ‘periphery’ and such categorisations. The art historian Piotr Piotrovsky called for a horizontality amongst the peripheries to overcome the bias of the centre-periphery construct (e.g., Piotrowski 2009; 2014). Others, like Carmen Popescu, have seen remedy in the natural globalisation of our discipline and the paradigmatic marginality of Eastern Europe that can thus show the way (Popescu 2014). Yet others, like Ákos Moravánszky, have long championed and complicated the study of such ‘states in between’ by drawing

vectors of power to multiple directions and opening up the terms and labels used (e.g., Moravánszky 1998), while scholars in his wake have employed the concept of ‘in-betweenness’ to describe the particularities of Yugoslavia (Kulic, Mrduljas, and Thaler 2012).

In the past few years, an increasing number of published studies have sought to decentre the field of Soviet architectures and refocus on the specific qualities and roles of architecture in building or undoing structures of empire across and beyond Russia’s borders (e.g., Hock and Allas 2018; Murawski 2019; Bykov and Gubkina 2019; Stanek 2020; Crawford 2022; Kallestrup et al. 2022). Many of their authors and contributors were present in Helsinki, and it was their spirit the conference sought to further and amplify.

Conference

The conference brought together over 50 scholars to listen to 27 papers, divided into seven sessions (see full programme at the conference website: <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/conferences/states-between/programme>), each session having a separate chair and a discussant who had read the papers beforehand. There were no parallel sessions, and everyone was invited to shared events and a dinner with the aim of creating a tightly knit network and providing space for discussion in multiple registers. The opening event, with its keynote performance and installation that I conceived with the two artists, the photographer Dan Dubowitz and the musician Tuomas Toivonen, set the tone for the ambition of the conference in its radical rethinking of the ways in which to practise and present historical research (see a review in this same journal: Crawford 2023). The closing keynote by Jean-Louis Cohen book-ended the event by giving a sweeping reading of the entanglements of empire, colonialism, and architecture in between personal and general, and from Paris to Moscow and Casablanca to Kharkiv.

The papers presented at the conference tackled its theme from multiple perspectives. The geographic, disciplinary, and chronological division was broad, from sociological and anthropological studies of reception, representation, and social practices around monuments and buildings to the study of bureaucratic systems and diplomatic relations. Many of the papers opened up the struggle for forging national forms and spaces under the pressure of empire. Whether it was the organisation of a network for building a model village in interwar Romania or looking for national styles and ornaments in 1920s Georgia or 1890s Finland, it was made clear that architecture has long acted as a key catalyst for defining and displaying national identity. Many of the papers highlighted how such narratives were often connected to the tastes

and decisions of imperial capitals: 'local' styles being designed in imperial centres, or national actors adopting the modes of operation of the empire. Others highlighted horizontal connections amongst imperial peripheries. Such complication and refutation of a dualistic dynamic between centre and periphery in imperial situations, and asking what we can learn from and about architecture through such an approach, was one of the aims, and successes, of the conference. The systems and practices of outright violence and coloniality and the ways in which architecture is used as their instrument was another recurring theme. While similar analysis has previously been done in particular on architecture under Stalin (e.g., Hudson 1993; Kotkin 1995; Meerovich 2008), most of the architectural tools of coloniality analysed at the conference appeared at once new and obvious: blind spots of historiography hiding in plain sight, revealed by the matrix of the conference. Brought together, they started to paint a picture of widespread, systematic, and multifaceted relations between architectural design and construction as tools within the Russian imperialist playbook across decades and centuries.

Another aim of the conference was to open up the shadows and legacies of imperial heritage. Papers brought up how architecture is entangled with such meanings through standing as a witness to or looking back in time to create imperial fictions of grandeur. New material expressions of empire often appropriate history to find legitimisation, while nationalist narratives had to choose whether to build on or refute those pasts and replace them with others. The presence of buildings and monuments in physical spaces as much as in cultural representations is implicated in practices and rituals of remembrance, which are often part of the contested legacies of foreign rule. The conference brought together different means by which to encounter such legacies in scholarship as well as in the broader society, reminding us how our work as historians also bears meaning for our present and our future.

As highlighted by Jean-Louis Cohen in his closing keynote (**Figure 2**), a comparison with other historic empires can sharpen our analysis and point out issues that otherwise would not be noticed. Besides the broad temporal and geographic perspective, the disciplinary disparity seen at the conference helped to open up such issues. In papers that analysed architecture with broader infrastructures, whether it was housing or oil mines in the Arctic or an organisational analysis of central systems of expansion and extraction, it was made clear that in its ambition, reach, and means, empire is deeply entangled with questions of ecology, perhaps particularly so in the given geographies where infrastructures crossing continents by land act as a physical, integrating structure of an empire. Roads, railroads, and pipelines, as well as the institutions that build and maintain them, form an important field of research in

discussions of imperialism and architecture. Close to them and often deeply related to the shaping of both cities as well as much broader landscapes, yet often left outside analyses of architecture, is the military. As highlighted by the opening keynote as well as many of the papers, the material construction of empires is often led, or at least accompanied, by the shaping of built environments by military operators. Following these discussions of outright and violent power, some papers analysed case studies where power structures have been entirely hidden beneath the imperial gaze and historiographies built upon it. Tracing pockets of resistance and exploring alternative, non-western, and indigenous logics of space and architectural genealogies were some of the most productive approaches seen in the conference.



Figure 2: The closing keynote lecture by Jean-Louis Cohen about to begin in the central hall of the National Library of Finland on June 9, 2023, designed by Carl Ludvig Engel. Photograph by Dan Dubowitz.

Outcome

At the end of the conference, the framework that poses the question of the role of empire-building in the architecture of the spaces under its influence seems at once necessary and impossible. Many papers drew attention to the impossibility of too simplistic vectors of power between the centre and periphery. At the same time, the enthusiasm around the conference showed that such an approach is necessary, and

the papers presented showed it can be revelatory. The conference also showed that the power of overcoming this paradox is in the comparative setting that complicates its duality as soon as it is established. The close study of each situation, combined with a comparison with one another as well as against various contexts and contexts — from the bureaucracies of empire to its material infrastructures, from alternative ways of seeing the past to looking into the blind spots of historiographies of the area — appears to be the recipe for success. Here is another hidden paradox: that an empire, by its very logic, commands a comparative perspective on its subjects. This is important to keep in mind when reframing their study — not to replicate such a perspective, but to question it and replace it with one grounded in a decentred, critical, decolonising, comparative view that aims to bring down the empire, not replicate and amplify its logic. The power of such events as this conference, and such organisations as the EAHN, is their ability to create a common ground for such comparisons. Their communal fluidity allows them to bring together the peripheries, which only in a shared exchange of their multiplicity can ever turn against and replace the centres and thus redefine the ways in which we see the world.

In his closing keynote, Cohen also noted the simple power of us all being there, urging us to take the opportunity of the conference dinner that followed his talk to plot future funding bids and projects to rethink these hierarchies and geometries of power, for it is not a task anyone can do alone. This speech remained one of the last that Cohen gave, as he unexpectedly passed away later that same summer. The broadness of his perspective and his curiosity towards new ideas, together with a readiness to reconsider in face of new evidence, as was demonstrated by his presence in Helsinki, will undoubtedly persist as one of his legacies. It remains to be seen if funding bodies agree with him and what forms of comebacks the conference will have. As such, and I believe I can speak for more than only myself, the conference acted as a necessary moment to reconsider the contexts and questions through which we practice our scholarship, and in that sense, it marked an important shift in the field.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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