



Nicely Wrapped: Gifts as a New Perspective on Global Urbanism?

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A review of *The Gift: Stories of Generosity and Violence in Architecture*. Exhibition curated by Damjan Kokalevski and Łukasz Stanek at the Architekturmuseum der TUM (Pinakothek der Moderne), from February 29 to September 8, 2024. The thought provoking, enjoyable exhibition features four examples of architectural gifts and the relation to their urban context in globally different situations. The notion of architecture as a gift is an inspiring concept, contributing to the discourse about complex power games, the symbolic meaning of monuments, and the agency of architecture.

Keywords: global urban theory; monuments; post-colonial urbanism; socialist modernism; urban transformation



This exhibition undoubtedly is a gift. It brings to the fore relations between architecture and the urban that are unnoticed by many but strongly influence the cities people live in. The way it is presented is simultaneously thought provoking and enjoyable. Its subject is how gifts consisting of architecture in the form of land, buildings, and urban design as a contribution to urban transformation and dynamics of cities worldwide are granted, received, interpreted, and altered, a topic that introduces us to new ways of evaluating urban international relations, challenges established views and paradigms in the field of global urbanism, and implicitly addresses the symbolic agency of architecture as monuments.

The exhibition, a symposium, and online publications (Stanek et al. 2024) provide extensive material on case study analysis while opening up new theoretical questions. At the same time, the exhibition is pleasurable and insightful for people not professionally related to the field and helps raise their awareness of and curiosity about actors and interests in the making of our cities and the power of architecture. The curators mimic the experience of the architectural and spatial characteristics of the four selected examples of 'gifts' in their respective urban contexts on different continents by creating individual environments for the case studies through the spatial arrangement of movable walls, large photographs, plans, and video projections that make the specific place and concept of the presented architectural gift accessible. The arrangement of each of the booths reproduces an impression of the urban situation in Skopje (North Macedonia), Kumasi (Ghana), Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia), and East Palo Alto (USA). Architectural models, everyday objects, historic and contemporary photos, plans, diagrams, and videos of in-depth interviews as well as accompanying texts in English and easy-to-understand German allow visitors to dive deeper each case. This broad variety of media, together with the polyphony of authors and sources — including lots of local voices and first-hand material — offers a comprehensive overview of the case studies and gives visitors different ways to approach the material. The materials 'tell stories' (Lepik 2023: 9), documenting the specific urban and political situation at the time the architectural gift was made along with its afterlife and impact on the respective city and raising the possibility that the power relations originating from these transfers could make themselves felt in other spheres such as political, societal and cultural transformations and empowering processes. The four case studies are framed by a brief introduction and an epilogue touching upon local examples in the cities of West Berlin and Munich in Germany and Ann Arbor in the USA.

The Skopje installation that serves as the example of 'the humanitarian gift' examines how international architectural gifts in the wake of the devastating 1963 earthquake have influenced the rebuilt city. The immediate support for and collaboration

with the then Yugoslavian city by Eastern and Western countries at the peak of the Cold War was seen as a symbol of hope. The monumental Universal Hall (**Figure 1**), used for sports, cultural events, and political gatherings that was funded mostly by African and Asian countries, receives special attention. During the Yugoslavian era, its character as a gift was highlighted by several events; however, the political rupture in the 1990s caused a shift in the building's symbolic meaning, affecting its use and maintenance. A possible new interpretation of it is part of the discussions around the designation of Skopje as European Capital of Culture 2028.



Figure 1: Model of the Universal Hall, Skopje.
Source: Alissa Diesch, 2024.

The installation for Kumasi, which represents ‘the gift of land’, analyzes the campus of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana (**Figure 2**). Its formal predecessor, the Ghana College of Technology, was founded in 1951 by the British colonial government on what the British referred to as ‘forest’ and ‘gifted land’, even though the land had been used for farming before and had already been formally leased from the *asantehene* (monarch of the Ashanti people, now the ceremonial leader) for 60 years at the time, who then renewed the lease for another 50 years. Today on the campus, one can observe an architecture and urban arrangement testifying their ‘modern’ and ‘Western’ background as well as the continuing agricultural use of the land. The fact that the college has no formal contract for the land, that the land is still used for farming, and that it continues to be described as a ‘gift’ made by the now urbanized neighboring communities reflects the ambiguity surrounding its ownership.



Figure 2: Installation of the campus of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi.
Source: Alissa Diesch, 2024.

The Ulaanbaatar installation that exemplifies the ‘the diplomatic gift’ presents a city whose urban concept has been strongly influenced by architectural gifts over the last hundred years. The transformation from an agglomeration of vernacular nomadic

felt dwellings to a ‘modern’ city through a combination of Soviet and Maoist planning and training and Mongolian implementation has deeply shaped the everyday life of its inhabitants. The installation focuses on the city’s biggest microdistrict set up between 1976 and 1987, an area local residents have called ‘Brezhnev’s gifted blues’ for a long time, owing to the fact that it was funded by Brezhnev’s USSR and to the bluish color of the buildings that make it up. Changes to the city and in views regarding donorship and acquisition are brought to light through the example of a family of three generations who continuously have shared an apartment in this district (**Figure 3**).



Figure 3: Installation of an apartment in ‘Brezhnev’s gifted blues’, Ulaanbaatar.
Source: Alissa Diesch, 2024.

The East Palo Alto installation representing ‘the philanthropic gift’ sheds light on transformations in the city’s governance and on the way private actors increasingly influence urban design and democratic decision making there. Situated in the Silicon Valley, next to booming high-tech enterprises, the city exemplifies consequences of urban policies based on ‘philanthrocapitalism’. Racist, discriminatory practices in social welfare and in the real estate sector in the 1950s, together with the physical barrier of an expanded highway in 1964, effected a harsh socio-spatial segregation between East Palo Alto and Menlo Park. Attempts to tackle that divide through

private-public-partnerships between the city and philanthropic foundations of the neighboring tech elite over the past 20 years have resulted in a charity-as-investment approach that has compromised public influence on urban policy as well as its transparency.

The exhibition can be enjoyed in a single visit, while the online publication connected to it invites fellow professionals to explore the empirical as well as theoretical background of the exhibited examples along with others. The website even links to other exhibitions (Ndikung 2024). This approach instead of a printed catalog is an up-to-date solution and technically works fine. The extensive, well-documented fieldwork carried out in cooperation with local experts is impressive, and no doubt generating new insights and theoretical concepts demanded it. However, the publication falls short; the collection of loose, rather weakly linked essays requires a more thoroughly developed framework, as right now it is missing an account of results and even fails to offer hypotheses. While the introduction poses gripping questions, answers are barely formulated. The case studies (Hefti and Kokalevski 2019; Stanek 2020) have resulted in a stimulating project that is clearly more about opening new horizons than handing down wisdom from the ivory tower to nonexperts but the discussion of overarching issues remains a bit vague.

The notion of architectural gifts as an interesting concept reasserts architectural agency and demonstrates the importance of concrete urban situations to current global urban theories (Kuhnert, Ngo, and Uhlig 2017), relating them to the complex interplay of power games and the symbolic meaning of monuments. This thought-provoking collection of case studies can be seen as a *mise en place* for further insightful elaborations. It can possibly be linked to debates regarding how to overcome still existing East-West and North-South divides, which would enrich post-colonial accounts (Lokko 2023) by highlighting the material-spatial aspects of urbanity as architecture's transformative capacity. A single exhibition presenting fresh ideas can perhaps only do so much, and maybe an open, provocative project like *The Gift* is gift enough for a city like Munich. The exhibition has not ended yet; its framework is grounded in interactive formats that call on us to contribute to the ongoing debate about cities.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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