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Geopolitics, Aesthetics and Postmodern Architecture

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Histories of postmodern architecture have generally accepted the idea that postmodernism is embedded in the cultural logic of late capitalism. In this collection, however, we show that architectural postmodernism is not just a mere symbol of neoliberalism in the West but intertwined with the larger dynamics of imperialism on the one hand and socialism on the other. 'Geopolitics, Aesthetics and Postmodern Architecture' explores a series of political tensions, corporate ambitions and intellectual exchanges transcending the capitalist core countries that shows that architectural history is well positioned to advance a historical approach to postmodernism in the context of uneven global development.

Keywords: postmodern architecture; politics of architecture; geopolitics; capitalism; socialism

Postmodernism Worldwide

In the 1980s, the architect, historian and curator Paolo Portoghesi connected the rise of postmodernism to the struggle of the Polish Solidarity movement against bureaucracy and totalitarianism, noting that 'the architecture of our century opposes ideology to life, projects to reality' (Rose 1991: 157). For Portoghesi (1983), postmodern architecture could be interpreted in political terms, an idea shared by many voices in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Indeed, the message of Charles Jencks's *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* spread like wildfire across the state socialist East: the architectural communities in Czechoslovakia, Estonia and other countries each having their own story of epiphany connected with the work of the American-British architectural theorist. Yet postmodernism developed a cult-like following not only among those who rejected official, standards-based architectural and planning policies but also among figures in positions of authority, such as Alexander Ryabushin, the secretary of Soiuza sovetskikh arkhitektorov, the union of Soviet architects.

'Geopolitics, Aesthetics and Postmodern Architecture' shows how architectural historians have challenged the notion of postmodernism as merely a cultural logic of late capitalism, as apolitical or, at best, aligned with conservative or neoliberal policies, an idea that in part owes to the fact that scholarship on postmodernism has largely focused on the US and has emphasized pastiche, collage and similar aesthetic techniques as markers of postmodern style. A series of intellectual exchanges that have taken place outside the capitalist core countries demonstrate that the cultural logic of postmodernism is not necessarily or intrinsically capitalist and simultaneously question the reductionist view of culture as a form of representation. As this collection shows, architectural history is well positioned to advance a historical approach to postmodernism in the context of political economy, colonialism and other histories.

The last decade has witnessed a critical and historical reevaluation of postmodernism. First-person accounts by postmodern architects reflecting on their own career (Stern 2009; Jencks 2011; Farrell and Furman 2017) have been published in parallel with critical and historical scholarship on architectural postmodernism in primarily the US and Europe (Martin 2010; Otero-Pailos 2010; Stanek, Bujas, and Bartnicki 2012; Petit 2013; Krivý 2016; Szacka 2016; Patteeuw and Szacka 2018; Lavin 2020; Urban 2021; Giamarelos 2022). A key theme in this work is the international exchanges between Western countries and the so-called second world, primarily the Soviet Union and state-socialist Eastern Europe but also Japan, China and other East Asian countries (Moravánszky and Lange 2017; Wang and Heynen 2018; Kulić 2019; Roskam 2021). Rethinking the idea of postmodernism as embodying the 'cultural logic of late socialism' (Kulić 2019: 3) is a historiographical gesture towards destabilizing the Western canon of postmodern architecture.

The articles in this collection contribute to global histories of postmodernism by considering underexplored geographies such as the Soviet Union as well as and unexplored ones like Chile. The articles also expose the limits of the argument that associates postmodern architecture with image production. While popular terms such as 'iconic architecture' or 'starchitecture' register an expanding chasm between professional discourses in the field and architecture's wider reception and relevance, the fact that the popular idea of postmodern architecture is equated with exuberance cannot explain how architecture gained a heightened significance in the public arena in the first place. Understanding the newly elevated status of architecture in society requires examining how design, construction and other architecture-based practices shape and are shaped by politics and economy. The historical study of buildings and other architectural artifacts concerns the materialization of capitalist or imperialist social relations—as well as those of socialist and other competing systems—in specific times and places.

The contributions assembled for this collection were selected from two conference sessions we organized at the 2018 EAHN biannual conference in Tallinn and the 2019 SAH annual conference in Providence. Our initial goal was to link postmodern forms, styles and typologies to globally significant political movements such as neoliberalism, nationalism and environmentalism, and so we prompted the authors to think about architecture in relation to geopolitics and aesthetics. The connection between architecture, politics and ideology suggests that postmodern architecture is an effect of intellectual exchanges as well as policy frameworks and economic strategies. While 'Geopolitics, Aesthetics and Postmodern Architecture' contributes to an account of how buildings signify meanings that is more global in nature, its main contribution is more robust and diverse explanations of architecture as a form of globalized cultural practice, complete with 'geographical imaginaries' vying for influence in different parts of the uneven world.

Aesthetics and Politics

Rather than by focusing on what is commonly understood as the 'language' of postmodern architecture (historicism, pastiche, pluralism, and irony), this special collection draws attention to postmodernity as a reaction to modernity accompanied by a series of cultural, political and economic transformations. As an intellectual current, postmodernism employed 'concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning' (Aylesworth 2015). Its premise was that a destructive and oppressive belief in progress, reflected in the embrace of modern science, technology, reason and logic, was responsible for the Second World War and its horrors. In philosophy, what the French thinker Jean–

François Lyotard (1979) calls the postmodern condition concerns the transformation of knowledge into information and the consequent end of all metanarratives.

Historians of postmodern architecture tend to hew closely to poststructuralist theories of discourse for their philosophical framework. Jencks echoes Lyotard's reduction of philosophical or political ideas to mere language games in his advocacy of eclectic architectural language inspired by the ruins of modernist public housing. However, reading the stylistic eclecticism of architecture into the argument about pluralism or relativism of philosophical systems poses the risk of confining historical analysis to the realm of language. The neo-Marxian perspective represents an alternative approach to the study of architecture and society in the postmodern age. As is well known, for Fredric Jameson (1991) pastiche, irony and other postmodern aesthetic techniques are just so many expressions of global capitalism. Reflecting on the terminological confusion to which he himself contributed, Jameson has recently noted that 'the word I should have used was not postmodernism but rather postmodernity: for I had in mind not a style but a historical period' (2015: 104). Our twin emphasis on geopolitics and aesthetics harks to Jameson's (1995) lesser-known work on cinema that more explicitly links the analysis of cultural production under the capitalist global economy to geopolitical dynamics and positionality concerning imperial and neocolonial relations.

One of the foundational essays that prompted scholars to think of postmodern architecture as first and foremost linked to capitalism and power was American scholar Mary McLeod's 1989 essay 'Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism'. In this text, McLeod examines the relationship between architecture and politics in the 1980s and explains that the conservative wind that blew over American political life coincided with the emergence of a new 'yuppie' class and the proliferation of forms of postmodern architecture — 'luxury apartment towers, amenity-packed condominium developments, planned resort communities, larger suburban homes, and ubiquitous shopping centers' — associated with the private sector (1989: 27). Postmodern architects went along by marginalizing the social responsibility of their profession, what she calls the 'abjuration of all realms of the social' (McLeod 1989: 55). Following McLeod, others have studied postmodern architecture's connection to politics and power: Reinhold Martin (2010), for example, considers postmodern architecture to be a conceptual instrument of biopolitics.

An emerging topic in architectural history is the nexus of postmodernism and populism (Frausto and Szacka 2021). The idea that postmodern architecture appeals to 'real people' and not just the more informed elite, which was fostered by the famous 'learning from' approach (Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour 1972), is by now commonplace. Equally widespread is the belief that the built environment can be used in the service of both right- and left-wing populism. Stephan Trüby (2021), for example,

reveals how right-wing, authoritarian populists appropriate specific building types or spaces, such as country houses, churches, settlements and urban reconstruction projects, towards a revisionist take on history, a claim that is in line with social scientist scholar Jan-Werner Müller's assertion that there is 'an *elective affinity* between populism and a particular approach to the built environment' (2023).

However, postmodernity can also be conceptualized in relation to strategies for depoliticizing architectural practice and naturalizing urban change. For example, an approach to architecture like biomimetic design that seeks to imitate ecological dynamics is at odds with strategies that emphasize environmental justice or political ecology of design (Krivý and Gandy 2023). What justifies calling this architecture postmodern is not a historical or 'populist' style but an aesthetics of 'hysterical sublime' marking the destabilized nature/technology boundary.

Much of the theoretically innovative architectural historiography of postmodernism, including the literature on second-world postmodernisms, has developed in a critical dialogue with Jameson's neo-Marxian analysis. Yet the idea of culture that, as Raymond Williams (2005 [1980]) argues, encompasses everyday artifacts and practices and is characterized by a collective 'structure of feeling' that is marked by a series of conflicts along the capital/labor, urban/rural and other divides has so far remained underexplored by architectural historians. A cultural materialist perspective such as the one Sianne Ngai (2005) brings to her analysis of the role of affect and gendered labor in postmodern capitalism could allow architectural scholars to think historically about the connections between professional architecture cultures, imaginaries and affective experiences associated with design in an everyday setting, and the dynamic of capital and labor reproduction.

Exchange, Politics and Interests

'Geopolitics, Aesthetics and Postmodern Architecture' comprises three contributions that examine postmodern architecture in relation to modes of binational exchanges, political transfer, and interests and that share the desire to rethink and broaden existing approaches to history and theory of postmodernism.

The first article, 'Italo-Soviet Architectural Exchanges and Postmodernism under Late Socialism' by Da Hyung Jeong, situates postmodern architecture in the interstitial space between the 'capitalist West' and the 'socialist East'. Jeong challenges the reductive conception of one-way knowledge transfer in architecture from the West to the East and reveals the interdependence—a series of 'formal echoes' or mutual exchanges—between these two geographical poles, specifically between Italy and the Soviet Union. Mobilizing the postmodern concepts of simulacra and analogy, Jeong shows that postmodernism cuts across the socialist/capitalist divide: 'As the geopolitical gap between the communist

East and the capitalist West began to close,' he argues, 'a vast, all-encompassing semiotic field opened up in which free-floating architectural signs, defying all boundaries and dichotomies, kept on circulating in all directions and replicating themselves until the field became saturated with simulacra.' While Soviet architects such as Leonid Khaichenko were producing 'analogues' of Italian postmodern designs, Western architects such as Aldo Rossi and Paolo Portoghesi were drawing on Soviet socialist realism.

With 'Between Propaganda and Dissent: Postmodern Architecture in Pinochet's Chile', the second contribution to this special collection, Lydia Klein explores the highly ambiguous role postmodern architecture played in the neoliberal dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. The evidence from Chile challenges the argument that postmodern architecture is *inherently* apolitical or conservative, as its architects used postmodernism as an instrument both of propaganda and dissent. 'Chilean postmodernism of the 1970s and 1980s,' she argues, was 'profoundly imbricated in political projects with the government's agenda' as well as 'with efforts oppositional to Pinochet's dictatorship', such as that of architectural collectives like the Centro de Estudios de la Arquitectura that developed a politically and socially engaged version of postmodernism blurring the boundary between architecture and politics.

The last article, Aaron Cayer's 'Aesthetics of Indeterminacy: The Architecture of Conglomerates', examines headquarters and laboratory buildings mainly designed in the US between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s. Focusing on the work and theories of architects César Pelli and Anthony Lumsden, the article maintains that formal innovations in this corporate architecture were functions of corporate expansion, acquisition and management. These architects, Cayer argues, 'embraced flexible, omnidirectional aesthetic possibilities that were later described by critics and theorists as "postmodern"'. He shows that postmodern architecture does not merely 'represent' capitalism, but is a tool with which corporate conglomerates realize their geopolitical strategies related to global expansion.

In light of the evidence gathered by this collection's contributors, postmodern architecture can be interpreted as an ambiguous cultural practice shaping and shaped by a range of political systems and movements from neoliberalism to conservativism, populism, and state socialism. Engaging with the frontiers, margins or outsides of the late capitalist system, 'Geopolitics, Aesthetics and Postmodern Architecture' questions the notion of postmodernism as *the* cultural logic of capitalism through less deterministic accounts of architecture, postmodernity, and capitalist globalization. Thus, following a first wave of scholarship focusing on the capitalist landscape of the Western world and a second wave opening to the state-socialist countries of the East, this collection outlines a pathway toward a more global history of postmodern architecture.

Competing Interests

Léa-Catherine Szacka is the vice president of EAHN, the parent organisation of *Architectural Histories*, at the time of publication of this editorial, but all decisions related to the publication of the Special Collection were made prior to her tenure.

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