INTERVIEW

Cold War History beyond the Cold War Discourse: A Conversation with Łukasz Stanek

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This interview engages with Łukasz Stanek in a conversation that contextualizes the Special Collection in Architectural Histories on Marxism and architectural theory across the East-West divide. It follows Stanek's keynote lecture for the conference Theory's History 196X–199X: Challenges in the Historiography of Architectural Knowledge (Brussels, February 8–10, 2017) and his recent book, Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War (2019).

Introduction

Łukasz Stanek's work has crisscrossed the East-West divide in many ways. After a study of the empirical writings by Henri Lefebvre and their impact on his theory (see Stanek 2011; Lefebvre 2014), Stanek moved on to research the presence of Team 10 in Central and Eastern Europe (Stanek 2014), while his latest book addresses the Global South's entanglement with both sides of the Iron Curtain (Stanek 2019). He highlighted several themes of this upcoming book in his keynote lecture for the conference Theory's History 196X-199X: Challenges in the Historiography of Architectural Knowledge (Brussels, February 8-10, 2017). This interview, based on a written exchange over the course of several months, engages the author in a conversation that further contextualizes the contributions to this Architectural Histories Special Collection on the worldwide impact of Marxist thinking on architectural discourse.

Interview

Heynen & Loosen: You are familiar with many of the themes at the heart of this Special Collection on Marxism and architectural theory across the East–West divide [for *Architectural Histories*], and you have now read the articles by Nikola Bojić, Sheila Crane, Maroš Krivý, Ákos Moravánszky, and Ke Song. What is your first reaction to these diverse approaches to Marxism's entanglements with architecture?

Stanek: I am very sympathetic to the ambition of this Special Collection. One way of describing my recent work is to see it as an attempt at a Cold War architectural history beyond the Cold War discourse. While most archives of the former socialist regimes in Eastern Europe have been

opened, the tropes of Cold War propaganda continue to be influential in much of architectural history writing today. A clear challenge is, for example, capitalist triumphalism after the fall of the Berlin Wall, that reduced architecture's globalization to Westernization or Americanization. This triumphalist narrative was then often extended to a teleological path of development for modern architecture after World War II. Other examples include the devaluation of state-socialist architecture after the 1920s Soviet avant-gardes. Seen as produced by 'unfree' and collective labor, this architecture was regarded as incompatible with the post-Romantic creed of individual creativity and authorship that is still prevalent in architectural historiography. Another example is a narrative about architecture in socialism organized according to the opposition between 'bureaucracy' and 'utopia', the latter being the dominant way in which Western Marxists referred to the progressive character of socialism. Yet another example is an orientalist world view that sees Eastern European cultural production as strange and exotic, or, on the contrary, reduces it to a mere imitation of a presumed Western original. Related to this is the set of assumptions that endow some (Western) categories with world-wide validity while the application of others (those originating from Eastern Europe and the Global South) is restricted to specific geographies in the spirit of area studies, an essentially Cold War discipline.

The articles in the Special Collection challenge some of these entrenched tropes. Against the commonplace assumption that reduces Marxist discourse in the socialist world to ritualistic or formulaic functions, they make it clear that there were also many other uses of Marxism in state-socialist architectural culture. These straddled the descriptive, the normative, and the critical registers. Marxist discourse was instrumentalized to describe the reality of socialist countries; to define the future directions, ambitions, and development goals in these countries; and, at times, to take issue with aspects of 'socialism as it actually existed'. Some of the designers, scholars,

theorists, and educators discussed in the five articles used Marxism to make powerful claims against uneven development and economic inequality that persisted in socialism. They also backed their critique by means of site-specific surveys. These focused on patterns of industrialization, class structures (including categories like 'workers-peasants' and 'technical intelligentsia'), and forms of social conflict specific to post-war Eastern Europe.

In so doing, the protagonists of the five articles strategically activated some (rather than other) aspects of the heterogeneous Marxist tradition since the 19th century, and some (rather than other) experiences that were taking place elsewhere within the socialist world. Their work shows that exchanges among Comecon countries in Eastern Europe and China, and Algeria and Eastern Europe were real. But their participants had differing concerns and objectives, and in these exchanges, distinction was at least as important as borrowing. A similar process of borrowing and distinction took place in respect to Western Marxism, which provided some intellectuals in Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland with inspiration and conceptual tools for powerful critiques of urbanization processes in state socialism. This process is still underway in China today. A recent conference at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou (2017) that focused on the work of Lefebvre is a case in point here. Criticizing socialist regimes could have dire consequences for the critics. However, the employees of design institutes, planning offices, state administration, and universities discussed in this Special Collection were rarely 'dissidents'. This shows that the familiar distinction between Western Marxism, 'orthodox' Marxism, and 'dissident' Marxism is rarely helpful to understand architectural culture in socialist Eastern Europe.

Heynen & Loosen: Can you tell us more on how these themes relate to your latest book, *Architecture in Global Socialism* (Stanek 2019)?

Stanek: This book addresses the collaboration between architects, planners, and construction companies from socialist Eastern Europe and the newly independent countries in Africa and Asia during the Cold War. It argues that multiple instances of this collaboration decisively shaped the conditions of urbanization around the world, including West and North Africa, the Middle East, and Central, South, and Southeast Asia. Following a useful rephrasing of Lefebvre's intuitions in the recent work of Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2015), I understand urbanization as, first, the production and transformation of material elements and structures; second, processes of regulation and representation; third, practices of socialization and learning that take place in everyday life. The book studies so-understood urbanization in five cities in specific periods: Accra in the first decade of independence (1957-66), Lagos in the 1970s (Figure 1), Baghdad between the coup of Qasim (1958) and the first Gulf War (1990–1991), and Abu Dhabi and Kuwait City (Figure 2) in the final decade of the Cold War.

The book shows many, evolving, and not always consistent motivations for these exchanges of the Soviet Union and its satellite states in Eastern Europe in the late 1950s, followed by Yugoslavia and China a few years later. Under Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviets promoted the socialist path of development for decolonizing nations in direct competition with the West. The satellite countries in Eastern Europe largely followed the direction laid out by the Soviets. But they also pursued their own political, economic, and ideological goals. In the wake of the oil crisis of the early 1970s, their motivation to mobilize



Figure 1: View of Lagos Island from the roof terrace of the City Hall, Lagos, Nigeria. Photo by Ł. Stanek, 2015.

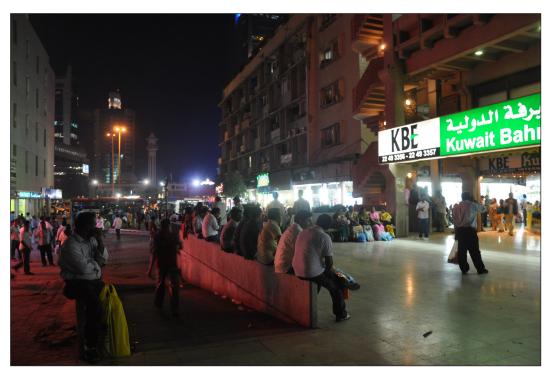


Figure 2: Kuwait City. Photo by Ł. Stanek, 2014.

architecture was increasingly mercantile, in response to the need to repay Western loans. On the other side of the transaction, some governments of the decolonizing countries embraced the socialist path of development. This was the case with Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah in the 1960s. But non-socialist regimes invited state actors from Eastern Europe, too. They did so to put pressure on the West, to tackle professional personnel shortage, and to stimulate competition between foreign firms. Nigeria is a good example here.

In this context, architects from socialist countries and their local counterparts in Nigeria and elsewhere pursued affinities beyond Cold War antagonisms. These included the earlier historical experience of imperial occupation of Eastern Europe (Prussian and Austrian in the West, tsarist and Ottoman in the East) during the long 19th century. By the end of that century, and during the interwar period, some Eastern European writers compared their region to Western European colonies in Africa and Asia. They drew similarities between political dependences and economic underdevelopment in Eastern Europe and in the colonies. This analogy was myopic, as it concealed Eastern European colonial fantasies of the interwar period and longer traditions of 'internal colonization' in the region. But it did provide a set of general reference points and specific architectural tools that had been developed in Central and Eastern European architectural culture since the 19th century. These tools were mobilized, often experimentally, by architects and planners from socialist countries who worked in the newly decolonized countries. Like Eastern Europe half a century before, these countries aspired to political independence, economic development, and cultural emancipation.

The book is structured around these competing visions of global cooperation, whether they resulted from state-socialist geopolitics or political economy, or emerged in individual encounters. It describes how these visions were practiced by design institutes, state contractors, architects, planners, managers, and educators from Eastern Europe and their counterparts in West Africa and the Middle East.

Heynen & Loosen: Based on the work presented in the articles, in our introduction we developed three theses on architecture historiography. We are curious to learn your reaction to them. The first states that we should adopt an intrinsically plural understanding of historicity. The impact of Marxism followed many different trajectories, each worthy of individual study. This means approaching these 'other' Marxisms on their own terms, as opposed to the habitual terms of Western Marxism. Did you feel the need to address this sort of pluralism in your work?

Stanek: A key dilemma for my work has been this question: how to understand difference and entanglement together? The question was very much on my mind when writing Henri Lefebvre on Space (2011). In that book I did not look at Lefebvre solely from Paris. I also studied the receptions and appropriations of his work in socialist Eastern Europe. But the same question has been especially important for Architecture in Global Socialism. In the context of the early Cold War, representatives of socialist countries who traveled to the Global South distinguished what they had to offer from what the West was offering. This included the claim about the specific character of the socialist path of development and the socialist modes of collaboration with developing countries. For example, envoys from socialist countries promoted the principle of 'mutual advantage'. They contrasted this principle with

the attempts of the colonial countries to prolong their economic domination and political hegemony over their former colonies. In retrospect, historians questioned such statements. Architectural and planning historians specifically pointed out the intense exchanges of knowledge that took place across Cold War divides. The recent three-volume book edited by Ákos Moravánszky and his collaborators (2016) is a case in point here. The best-known examples include the multiple iterations of the adaptation of the Anglo-American 'neighborhood unit' into the Soviet 'mikroraion' typology, and the appropriation of French prefabrication technology in Soviet large-scale housing systems of the Khrushchev era. Both became key elements of Soviet architectural export. In this light, the Cold War discourse of division and competition may appear as a mere ideological smokescreen that covers the intertwined and entangled post-war architectural culture.

However, this East-West entanglement does not preclude antagonism. To address them together, in Architecture in Global Socialism I develop the concept of worldmaking. Its theoretical references are multiple. They range from Lefebvre's idea of 'mondialisation' (2009) and Édouard Glissant's vision of 'mondialité' (1997), to discussions about 'worlding' in geography and urban studies (Simone 2001, Ong 2012). What emerges from these readings is the concept of the world as a historically specific dimension of practice, experience, and imagination. By worldmaking I understand the production of the world as a dimension of practice from within its many, often antagonistic, possibilities. This enables me to trace various iterations of socialist internationalism, the Non-Aligned Movement, and other East-South and South-South connections as diverse instances of worldmaking that

materialized after World War II. These cannot be reduced to Western-dominated 'globalization' (**Figure 3**).

I argue that the urbanization of Accra, Lagos, Baghdad, Abu Dhabi (Figures 4 and 5), Kuwait City, but also Algiers, Tripoli, Damascus, Kabul, Kolkata, Colombo, Jakarta, and many other Southern cities during the Cold War is best understood as part of these worldmaking dynamics. Nowhere is this more evident than in the expansion of the agency of local decision-makers. In contrast to the Cold War assumptions about post-independence leaders as Soviet or US 'proxies', architects, planners, administrators, and politicians in West Africa and the Middle East were able to tap into various, competing networks of collaboration in the Cold War. More often than not this agency was based on exploiting the differences between these networks. Decision-makers in the Global South used to their advantage the differences between state-socialist political economy of foreign trade and the emerging globalization of Western design and construction services. Furthermore, they were able to compare planning tools and technologies across Cold War divides in pursuit of those best suited to the local conditions. By describing these worldmaking dynamics, I hope to account for the plurality of the worlds within and across Eastern Europeans, West Africans, and Middle Easterners worked.

Heynen & Loosen: The second thesis argues that this pluralism also necessitates us to unpack the notion of 'theory' to understand the different ways in which theory is positioned in different societies. How do you see the interrelation between architecture theory, practice, and society in the different contexts you have studied?



Figure 3: International Trade Fair in Lagos, Nigeria. Photo by Ł. Stanek, 2015.



Figure 4: Bus Terminal, Abu Dhabi, UAE. Photo by Ł. Stanek, 2015.

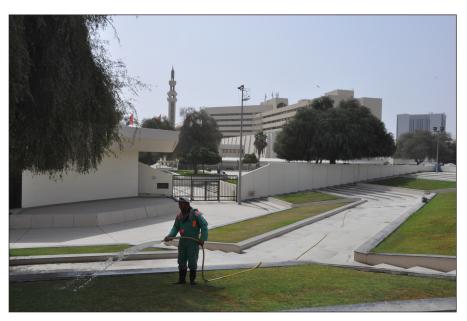


Figure 5: Municipality and Town Planning Department, Abu Dhabi, UAE. Photo by Ł. Stanek, 2015.

Stanek: Let me focus specifically on Marxist theory. Like the protagonists in the articles of the Special Collection, the main figures in my research also used Marxist discourse and theory in various ways and for various reasons. Sometimes they used it to explain their work to others and to themselves. Party officials used Marxist discourse to discipline professionals and workers. For example, they aimed to make them comply with the work ethics sanctioned by the Polish United Workers' Party or the Convention People's Party in Ghana. Professionals traveling abroad in turn used Marxist vocabulary to reach agreements with their local counterparts and to request concessions from the authorities at home. For example, East German architects in charge of a housing project in North Korea supported their request for a bigger budget by claiming ideological benefits from setting an example of a nonalienated, socialist way of life. Officials in socialist-leaning West African and Middle Eastern countries sometimes presented Marxism as specifically 'African' or 'Arab'. They mobilized it to explain their political, economic, and social visions and to distinguish themselves from the injustices and transgressions of the colonial regimes. In non-socialist countries in West Africa, like Nigeria, Bade Onimode (1982) and other intellectuals referred to Marxism to critically understand the development strategies pursued by their governments (even when these governments collaborated with the Soviet Union). Confronted with the failures of socialist revolutions in the Global South since the 1970s (as well as backlash in Soviet Central Asia), Soviet scholars were forced to revisit Marxist explanatory schemes. In so doing, they began to pay attention to questions of culture, nationalism, and religion.

At the architectural schools I researched, and especially at the Kumasi School of Architecture in Ghana (**Figures 6** and **7**), the most evident impact of Marxist

theories can be traced in urban and regional planning. In the early 1960s several planners in Kumasi, both Ghanaians and Eastern Europeans, rethought the relationship between cities and the countryside beyond the development patterns inherited from the colonial period. They took issue with specific concepts such as that of the 'hinterland' and attributed them, controversially, to what they called 'capitalist planning'. This rethinking was



Figure 7: Documentation of archival drawings in Kumasi, Ghana, phot. Ł. Stanek, 2018.



Figure 6: Unity Hall, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, phot. Ł. Stanek, 2018.

part of larger adaptations of Eastern European planning knowledge in Nkrumah's Ghana. These included the application of planning tools forged in state-led reconstruction of Eastern Europe after World War II. By contrast, Marxist references in architectural debates were much less present in Kumasi. While such widespread concerns as state interventionism in the building and construction-material industries and the redistribution of resources among broad population groups were sometimes presented in Marxist terms, they were actually shared by practitioners and educators coming from all over the world and subscribing to a variety of ideological, political, and economic positions.

In particular, Marxism had little to say about the one question that has been constantly debated in architectural schools in Ghana, Nigeria, and Iraq after independence: how to produce an architecture appropriate to the specificity of the place? And should that place be defined in climatic, cultural, religious, ethnic, or political terms? While similar questions were debated in Soviet Central Asian republics and impacted the work of Soviet architects abroad, for example in Mongolia, I did not see their influence in Ghana, Nigeria, or Iraq. To paraphrase Aimé Césaire (1972), the overarching challenge was to create a new architecture that neither revived the architecture of the precolonial society nor extended the colonial one.

Césaire pointed at the Soviet Union as an inspiration, but the actual research in the architectural schools which I studied rarely followed this piece of advice.

Heynen & Loosen: Our third thesis follows from the observation that the articles in this Special Collection, which unravel the contaminations between architectural discourse and politics, make it abundantly clear that an entirely apolitical or depoliticized architecture history is rather unfeasible. This observation challenges the idea of the historian as neutral observer. Even if unattainable, is the idea of writing history from a 'neutral' perspective still something to aim for? Or is it more laudable for the historian to take a firm *prise de position*? How do you consider your own position as historian?

Stanek: I'd like to understand your question as one about positionality: from where and for whom to write history (**Figure 8**). Here is an illustration of this dilemma. When I started working on my book, it was focused on 'Central Europe', because this was how most people I interviewed in Poland and other countries in the same region localized themselves. Evidently, I felt that I needed to respect that geographic description. But when I was invited for the first time to speak about this research in Lagos, I was asked to change the description of my talk from 'Central'



Figure 8: Discussion about the historical and future projects of the Marine Drive, James Town Café, Accra, Ghana. Photo by O. Uduku, 2019.

to 'Eastern' Europe: I was told that otherwise people would think that I was speaking about Switzerland.

As you can see in the title of my book, I have retained the term 'Eastern Europe'. I did so because it was the political category used to describe the region in question during the Cold War. But I also thought that this term is clearer for my primary audience, which I envisage not only as scholars but also practitioners working on urbanization in West Africa and the Middle East. For many of them, this research addresses the very reality that they are confronted with daily, as the results of Cold War collaboration with socialist Europe continue to impact urbanization conditions in many places in the Global South. For example, when I talk to planners in Baghdad, I am often asked about technical issues, like the rationale behind the plot sizes prescribed for the city by the Polish masterplanners in the early 1970s. These conversations confirm what scholars like Aihwa Ong (2012) have already argued: urbanization in the Global South is not reducible to the effects of the colonial encounters with Western Europe or the results of global capitalism.

Heynen & Loosen: Could you expand on your own theoretical position as you try to retain that open-ended nature of the realities you describe? How far has your own way of conducting research been impacted by a Lefebvrian version of Marxism? Perhaps this is reflected on the ways in which you define architecture, the kind of questions you ask, or the kind of material you are looking for. Can we not recognize the imprint of a politically informed position here that one might call 'Marxian' or 'post-Marxist'? Or do you think that these labels are harmful rather than helpful?

Stanek: Architecture in Global Socialism includes numerous continuities with my earlier work on Henri Lefebvre. In this sense, it engages with the Marxist tradition. But at the same time it confronts this tradition with postcolonial theory and subaltern studies. I share the starting point of my book, namely the focus on the political economy of architectural labor, with several Marxist-inspired historians of architecture. More specifically, I look at the mobilization of architectural labor within state-socialist networks and at the ways in which its changing trajectories, volumes, speed, rhythms, composition, and division were conditioned by the politics and economy of state socialism. Economic historians of the Cold War have debated for some time whether the Soviet Union aimed at establishing a parallel system of global economy or, rather, whether such claims were obfuscating the ambition of the Soviet leadership fir an integration into the Western economic system. Be that as it may, it is evident that the political economy of state-socialist foreign trade provided specific conditions and regulatory frameworks for the work of Eastern European design institutes, contractors, and individual architects abroad, which were different to the Western ones. In particular, the inconvertibility of currencies, the state monopoly on foreign trade, and the widespread use of barter in trade agreements resulted in specific modes of operation, incentives, and obstacles to architects, technicians, managers, and workers abroad. These largely defined their conditions of labor.

In the archives of socialist foreign trade organizations, architectural labor appears as an exportable resource. But this view was often challenged by the protagonists of my book. They saw their work abroad, above all, as a creative practice. They defined this practice as expressing the specificity of the foreign location when, for example, they modified European housing layouts to the customs of the local inhabitants. But they could be also invested in preserving the original performance of, for instance, a technical detail or a concrete structure, which often required great effort and resources. What becomes clear in the archives is that these professional practices were neither overdetermined by the political economies they were part of, nor 'autonomous'. Rather, and leaving this unhelpful dichotomy behind, I studied the multiple ways in which Eastern Europeans, West Africans, and Middle Easterners tried to avoid the constraints and exploit the opportunities stemming from the political economy in state socialism. This impacted specifically architectural tools and procedures. For example, I studied how Romanian architects and managers adapted their design procedures to the imperative of barter by redrawing third-party designs so that they could be built by means of Romanian material and labor, bartered for crude oil. Another example is the way in which the principle of inconvertibility of currencies in socialism shaped the mobility of Eastern Europeans and the conditions of their collaboration with local architects, managers, and technicians in West Africa and the Middle East.

These lived experiences of collaboration constitute yet another modality of architectural work on export contracts. Their account requires insights from postcolonial and subaltern studies, which complement, and sometimes question, the Marxist perspective. I am not convinced by the critique launched by some authors in subaltern studies who argue that a Marxist concept of capitalist modernity was inadequate for the Global South – a critique that Vivek Chibber (2013) recently took issue with. But postcolonial writers are indispensable to understand how the collaboration between Eastern Europeans and their counterparts in Africa and Asia, including collaboration in architecture, planning, and construction, was mediated by the memories of the colonial encounter. While socialist propaganda emphasized a united front of the 'Second' and the 'Third' worlds against the former colonizers and their US allies. these solidarities were often challenged on the ground. Many Eastern European architects saw themselves as part of an international architectural culture together with professionals from Western Europe and North America whether the latter agreed or not. In turn, many members of the traditional elites in West Africa and the Middle East drew political, economic, and cultural capital from their ties with the former metropolises. These elites saw little advantage in alliances with professionals from socialist countries. In both cases, the arrival of Eastern Europeans (often regarded by the Western-educated elites with skepticism) introduced a third element into the bipolarity of the (Western European) colonizer and the colonized. Their arrival brought back memories of race and racism that defined the colonial encounter. Even those Africans and Asians who were most invested in the active forgetting of the colonial past in the name of a postcolonial community were confronted by such memories.

The collaboration between Eastern Europeans, West Africans, and Middle Easterners should be seen as instances of decolonization at work. This includes both the myriad of individual experiences of such collaboration and their results, which shaped urbanization processes. Ghana under Nkrumah is a prime example of how urbanization meant a possibility of a radical reorganization of times and places assigned to specific groups during colonialism. This included undoing the spatial refraction of the polity according to the categories of race, 'tribe', class, gender, and age, and the redistribution of the postcolonial society in time and space according to a new societal vision.

This vision was evidently short-lived in Ghana and elsewhere. By the 1970s and 1980s few believed in the emancipatory potential of socialist urbanism. During the last two decades of the Cold War, Eastern European managers and architects working in foreign countries were among the most skeptical. But the first thing to remember as architectural historians is that the politics of an architecture is not the same as the politics of its architect. As a result, it would be a mistake to characterize the collaboration between the 'Second' and the 'Third' worlds in the manner in which Western Marxists like Lefebvre wrote about urbanization in socialist Eastern Europe, namely as nothing more than an unfulfilled promise. Just as this critique was misleading when state socialism was concerned, so would it be when applied to the work of state-socialist architects abroad. Their engagements did make a difference, both in the sense of changing everyday lives of large population groups, and in the sense of differentiating urbanization processes. Architecture in Global Socialism shows how the collaboration with Eastern Europe differentiated urbanization processes in the Global South beyond path-dependencies of colonialism and pressures of global capitalism. These differences are still operative: in material elements structuring the urbanization processes; in building standards and planning legislation still in use; or in institutional frameworks of architectural schools, administrative offices, and professional organizations. Today, many of them became resources in urban struggles, including those for social-spatial justice, that take place in West African and Middle Eastern metropolises. While these differences stemmed from Cold War geopolitics and socialist political economy, today they are open ended and available for re-appropriation. I hope that my book will contribute to the recognition of these openings.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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