

Friday, 15 June
9.00-11.45

Track: Comparative Modernities
Room: *National Library, Small Conference Hall*

CENTRALIZATIONS AND TERRITORIES IN THE ARCHITECTURAL PRODUCTION OF THE SOCIALIST WORLD

Session chairs: Richard Anderson, University of Edinburgh
Elke Beyer, TU Berlin

In the twentieth century, the architectural production of most state-socialist countries underwent significant processes of centralization. These were manifest in many ways: through the reorganization of architectural labour into centralized systems of design institutes; through the integration of design organizations with the construction industry and other vertical institutional structures; through the reinforcement of the capital city as a model urban and architectural project; through the centralization of architectural theory and discourse with the regulation of architectural education and the establishment of unions, academies, and journals. These and other aspects of centralization were inextricably tied to a complementary trajectory of territorialisation at a vast scale. This tendency is visible, for example, in the ambition of centralized design institutes to deliver projects to distant territories; in the reproduction of central hierarchies at regional and local scales; through the production of norms with significance across climatic zones; among others.

On the other hand, there was a highly ambivalent insistence on integrating particular national or regional traits in an effort to articulate the universalist agenda of centrally administered socialist modernization. The application of diverse architectural languages and local resonances was coupled with contested identity politics in states with a complex multicultural constitution. Over time, and by spreading over the national and transnational territories, centralized systems of architectural production and urbanism integrated and created ever more experts and institutions on the local level, sometimes generating centripetal tendencies in turn.

PAPERS:

The Unsettling Norms: Identity Politics in China's Search for Socialist Architecture with National Form

Yan Geng, University of Connecticut

This paper examines China's socialist architecture as a transnational undertaking that reflects the imperial dynamics of the socialist world and the complications in the transfer of international knowledge to national and regional contexts. It focuses on the 1950s, the period immediately after the Communist Party came to power, when 'socialist in content and national in form' was introduced as the official policy to direct art and architecture production in China. This official policy provoked debates among leading Chinese architects. They could neither reach a consensus about a definition of socialist architecture by applying ideological terms (such as form and content) and dialectical materialism to architectural criticism nor about national form that inevitably involved a reevaluation of traditional Chinese architecture, which was further complicated by regional differences. This paper investigates such debates centered around socialist architecture with national form in China and their impact on the socialist construction projects during the 1950s. It addresses the issues of translatability of architectural languages, the contested identity politics in the shaping of new architectural norms, and the broader historical transition of modern Chinese architecture across the mid-twentieth century.

Revisiting Socialist Baltic Regionalism: Between Local Myths and Critical Approaches

Marija Drėmaitė, Vilnius University

In Soviet geographical and political contexts, the three Soviet Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) were presented as one entity—‘the Baltics’ (or *Pribaltika*, as the region was known in Russian). The architecture of the Baltic region has been seen as exceptional within the Soviet Union, appropriating western cultural models much faster and with greater passion. It is commonly accepted that the Soviet occupation and forced introduction of Socialist Realism in the late 1940s and early 1950s drastically interrupted the development of the successful modernist schools of the Baltic States. However, it is evident that the Soviet doctrine of ‘socialist in content and national in form’ was rather well adapted in the 1950s in the Baltic republics, specifically in the creation (and continuation) of national Art Deco traditions. Even the revival of modernism in the early 1960s was closely connected to national narratives (in public art and interior decoration) and the search for a national expression of modernism (in the use of local materials and inspiration from Finnish regionalism). The 1970s saw a growing number of attempts to preserve regional identity in architecture based on the vernacular. This paper revisits the nature of Soviet Baltic regionalism, questioning whether it was a rather common reaction to the monotony of standardized socialist ‘boxes’, a search for a (modern) national identity within the Soviet Union, a continuation of the search for national style that was started already in the pre-war National States, or a conflict within the modernist school leading to the formation of specific Soviet Baltic regionalism. The research is based on a historiographical review, material held by the Lithuanian National State Archives (LCVA), interviews with architects in Lithuania, and an overview of the contemporary Soviet press.

Adapting Soviet Prefabricated Housing for the Regions

Nikolay Erofeev, University of Oxford

The most evident and peculiar feature of the Soviet mass housing programme was its totality—its push to total equality and, in Mark B. Smith’s words, its ‘effect on everyone’s lives, not just the poorest’. In 1957, the main goal of the Soviet housing programme was to provide each family with an economical and comfortable apartment. Considering the vast geography of the country and the variety of the population, the families eligible to receive an apartment were diverse in their size, lifestyle, socio-economic, and ethnic origins. The architectural problem was to find adequate technical means to address this variety in the regions.

This paper discusses how this task was addressed within the housing construction sector by scrutinizing one of the most widespread Soviet mass-produced housing series: the typology I-464. Designed in 1958 according to universal normative documents (‘Construction rules and regulations’ or SNiPs), it was replicated in various regions of the Soviet Union to accommodate thousands of families. Factories for the production of I-464 units were rapidly disseminated across the most distant regions of the USSR, where their production lines were adapted to make this typology fit with local building materials, climate, and seismic conditions.

This paper discusses two mechanisms of adaptation of this typology: (1) application of existing design in the process of ‘tying in’ (*pryvzyaka*) and (2) ‘experimental design’, which was a process of development of new building types for their further inclusion into the nomenclature of the typology. The experimental designs carried out by scientific institutes within the growing body of expertise addressed local demographic variables and the everyday life of future residents. Investigating this process reveals great architectural flexibility in this system of prefabrication and, subsequently, demonstrates how the corresponding norms were translated into new contexts, forming a basis for comfort in a minimal dwelling.

Architects Displaced: Making Architecture at the Periphery in Communist Romania

Dana Vais, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca

Given the economic disparities and cultural differences between its various historic regions, in communist Romania the centralization of architectural production was a means to an end: the homogenization of the built environment across the national territory. This paper addresses the centralized system of architectural production by looking at it from the margins and from below—focusing on peripheral design institutes (local or regional) and on architects (their formation, mobility inside the country, and the territorial reach of their practice).

During the first decade of the regime, almost all architects and all design institutes were based in the capital Bucharest. Decentralization and regional differentiation became important issues after the late 1950s, however, and the system of architectural design expanded into the territory. A flow of ‘human resource’ was pumped through the system, from centre to periphery. Architects became the agents of a development that was intended to be both nationally systematized and locally specific. Originating from all over the country and for a while recruited under the condition of ‘healthy origins’, they were trained in a single school in Bucharest (and partially also in three short-lived regional schools during the 1970s) and then redistributed across the territory. Some of them were displaced to marginal locations, while others worked for distant places from more or less central positions.

What was it like to be an architect at the periphery, compared to one in the centre? Were there any patterns in architects' mobility across the country? What kind of projects were drawn up locally, and what kind of design activities never left the centre? Have peripheral institutes and local schools of architecture been instrumental in producing the much desired local specificity in architecture, or was it also rather centrally produced?

Dialectics of Centrality in the Global Cold War

Łukasz Stanek, University of Manchester

In 1972, a representative of colonel Gaddafi confessed to the envoy of Nicolae Ceaușescu a preference for Romanian construction companies over Soviet ones, because of Libyan concerns about Soviet hegemony in the region. This statement pointed at a dynamic that defined much of the mobility of architecture from socialist countries during the Cold War, a dynamic which hardly reflected the received vision of the socialist world consisting of satellites revolving around the Soviet Union at its center. Rather, centrality in this world needs to be understood as dialectical: the capacity of the centre to concentrate, aggregate, attract, and integrate went hand in hand with its power to repel, disperse, fragment, and stir competition.

In this paper, I argue that export contracts from socialist countries offer a privileged vantage point for studying this dynamic. I will show that the Soviet Union was not always the most prominent actor among socialist countries in their work abroad. This argument will be made by looking at instances of collaboration and competition between architects, design institutes, and construction companies from socialist countries in four places during the global Cold War: Accra (Ghana) under Kwame Nkrumah (1957–1966), Lagos (Nigeria) under military governments (1969–1979), Baghdad (Iraq) from the coup of Qasim to the first Gulf war (1958–1990), and Abu Dhabi (UAE) during the last decade of the Cold War.

This overview will show that actors with little political leverage, fewer economic resources, modest technological offerings, and less cultural cachet were often preferred by local governments over those coming from the Soviet Union as the center of the socialist world. I will argue that the peripheral position of Bulgarian, Polish, and Romanian actors and its corollary, such as flexibility and adaptability, made these actors highly

instrumental, and often favoured, within development roadmaps of local administrators, planners, and decision makers in West Africa and the Middle East.