

Thursday, 14 June
14.30-17.15

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

THE POLITICAL AESTHETICS OF POSTMODERNISM: BETWEEN LATE SOCIALISM AND LATE CAPITALISM

Session chairs: Léa-Catherine Szacka, University of Manchester
Maroš Krivý, Estonian Academy of Arts / Cambridge University

In 1983, Paolo Portoghesi, in *Postmodern, The Architecture of the Post-Industrial Society*, connected the rise of postmodernism to the struggle of the Polish Solidarity (*Solidarność*) movement against bureaucracy and totalitarianism. He wrote: 'The architecture of our century opposes ideology to life, projects to reality.' While Portoghesi extracted architectural messages from a political field, authors in the East interpreted postmodern architecture in political terms. The aesthetic pluralism of Charles Jencks, whose *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* fascinated the circles of *samizdat* and *nomenklatura* alike, was a highly charged political notion for such diverse figures as Václav Havel, then a Czech dissident, or Alexander Ryabushin, then Secretary of the Union of Soviet Architects.

Prompting a particular bonding between design and ideology, the flourishing of postmodern aesthetics in the East and in the West was arguably connected to the shift from late socialism to late capitalism. Yet very few postmodern authors and architects would acknowledge their complicity with capitalist expansion. Looking at examples of postmodern translations in both western and eastern countries in the 1980s and 1990s, this session will tackle the intricate relations between politics and aesthetics and the role these have played out in the development and global expansion of postmodernism in architecture. We are interested in the following questions:

- What were the geopolitical dynamics of architectural postmodernism as its tenets were translated from socialist to capitalist contexts and back?
- What was the political import of postmodernism's apparent return to life and reality? Was it an 'aesthetic instrument' of capitalism pure and simple, or was it a way of reinventing socialism?
- How did such contrasting terms as totalitarianism and pluralism oscillate between political discourses and aesthetic domains?
- How did late socialist architects understand, translate, and domesticate postmodernism, as the quintessential—to quote Jameson—'cultural logic of late capitalism'? How did the late socialist experience of eastern countries shape the work of postmodern architects and theorists in the West?
- And finally, in what 'ghostly' forms (to refer to Reinhold Martin) has postmodernism endured since the apparent end of history in the 1990s?

Provincializing Postmodernism: Appropriation and Transformation of Postmodern Tropes in Česká Lípa

Ana Miljački, MIT

On 24 and 25 October 1980, an international jury led by Professor Herald Deilmann and including Kenneth Frampton, Richard Meier, and Rem Koolhaas, reviewed design proposals for a northwestern harbour district of Berlin, Tegel. The jury of the Tegel recreation centre competition—one of 21 competitions organized by the Internationale Bauausstellung-Berlin (International Building Exhibition), IBA'87 in the period between 1978–1987—awarded the first place to Charles Moore, while a Czech team from Liberec (simply referred to as 'Stavoprojekt' in the exhibition catalogues) shared the second place with Ralph Erskine.

The Czechoslovak architects' participation in IBA was perhaps a token of plurality celebrated by the organizers, but both its inclusion in the IBA project and its architectural language open up a much larger question concerning the circulation of postmodern discourse and its constitutive entanglement with the Cold War. Relying on the IBA housing by architects involved in SIAL's Školka, as well as on their concurrent projects in Česká Lípa, this paper proposes that these architects produced their work in imaginary conversation with contemporary developments in the West. Even if one-sided and imaginary—in the sense that Benedict Anderson thought all communities were imagined—their conversation across geo-political contexts resulted in adaptations of various architectural 'sources' to Czechoslovak socialist reality.

While this paper is in many ways sympathetic to Fredric Jameson's formulation—in which postmodernism is a periodizing concept corresponding with a complex set of political, economic, and cultural circumstances—it precisely seeks to re-theorize the geopolitical premise at the base of his definition of postmodernism to include 'second world' production. If indeed imaginary conversations across 'the wall' could be said to have been constitutive of late socialist architectural production, that would inevitably decentre (or provincialize, as Dipesh Chakrabarty might say) all definitions of postmodernism produced by late capitalism and its theorists.

National in Form, Socialist in Content: Postmodern Architecture on the Soviet Periphery
Angela Wheeler, Harvard University

The final decades of the Soviet Union are widely referred to as 'The Era of Stagnation,' and yet this period also produced some of the most innovative Soviet architecture since the heady avant-garde days of the Revolution. Viktor Jorbenadze's 1985 Palace of Rituals in Tbilisi is an outstanding example of the genre: extravagant and otherworldly, it might appear as if from the pages of *Galaxy Science Fiction*. The Palace, however, embodies not only an aesthetic paradox, but also an ideological one: a cathedral in an atheist land, a lavish commission in a decade of economic torpor, and a dynamic integration of international influences by a supposedly insular regime. The Wedding Palace would appear to be the wrong building in the wrong place at the wrong time.

These seeming contradictions oblige us to rethink the Soviet experience and postmodernism as both a style and cultural condition. This paper argues that, in a dramatic departure from the modernist aesthetics of the 1960s, which had ignored local vernacular traditions, late Soviet architects like Jorbenadze explored designs 'national in form' (sensitive to local historic fabric) but also 'socialist in content' (reflective of Soviet values). With the communist future a thing of the past, Leonid Brezhnev's 'developed socialism' fostered and legitimized historicism in ways that redirected Soviet design culture, making engagement with the past (even national pasts) ideologically acceptable. The result was a dynamic, historically-inflected postmodern architecture that emerged from the cultural logic not of late capitalism but rather of late socialism—reviving and perhaps inverting the socialist realist artistic formula. A clearer understanding of postmodernism's provenance in the USSR complicates tidy narratives of the style as a global phenomenon.

Contra the Late Socialist Vaudeville: Critiques of Postmodernism in East Germany
Torsten Lange, ETH Zurich

In the late 1970s, East German architects began to embrace postmodernism. Under the banners of experience, locality, and identity, they employed historical references and traditional urban typologies in their projects. Their aim was to counter environments that, for several years, had been criticized as monotonous, characterless, and disorienting. Despite sharing those concerns, architectural critics and theorists nonetheless remained rather cautious of the new, postmodern aesthetics. Among them was the philosopher Lothar Kühne (1931–1985). During the 1970s and 1980s, Kühne, who held a professorship

at Humboldt University in East Berlin, became one of the most influential—if controversial—thinkers. He developed an aesthetic theory of architecture and design rooted in both Marxist ideology and poetics, which questioned ruling party doctrine and sought to salvage functionalism as legitimate principle for the communist future.

Focusing on Kühne's writings, this paper shows how the substitution of a working class utopian project with a real socialist present characterized by consumption and widespread cynicism formed the underlying object of his (and others') fierce critiques of postmodernism. Debates concerning the latter's validity within socialism played out against the backdrop of such prestigious urban design projects as the reconstruction of Friedrichstraße—the Neuer Friedrichstadtpalast (1984) as the project's centrepiece, in particular—whose superficial references to the mass culture and entertainment of the 1920s sought to appeal to popular taste. Kühne's criticisms of postmodernism's 'meaningless shells', of trivialization and pleasure without memory, were framed—perhaps unsurprisingly—in historical terms of class struggle and the antagonism between the bourgeois capitalist and socialist systems. Yet, the paper asks to what extent those critiques, rather than merely being directed at the ideological opponent, have been aimed at what could be called, with reference to Fredric Jameson's critical analysis as well as Alexei Yurchak's anthropological studies of socialist everyday life, the culture of late socialism.

Postmodernism and Neoliberalism in Santiago de Chile in the 1980s

Daniel Talesnik, TU München

This paper explores the ways in which architecture, particularly architecture influenced by postmodernism, became emblematic of the development of neoliberalism in Chile before and after the national economic crisis of 1982.

In the early 1970s, Chile had become an unlikely Cold War site, and with the help of the United States, the threat represented by the democratic election of Salvador Allende, a Marxist candidate, was violently suppressed in 1973. In the aftermath of the coup, one key aspect of American influence was the implementation of economic theories developed by a group of economists that came to be known as the 'Chicago Boys': Chilean students of Milton Friedman who became extremely influential in the reorganization of the country's economy during Pinochet's dictatorship.

Despite excellent scholarship on the economic side of the equation, Chilean architectural production during this period has yet to be adequately interpreted. If Chile was the first country to democratically elect a Marxist candidate, it later became the first testing ground for the completely opposite political and economic project of neoliberalism, allowing Friedman's acolytes to play Monopoly with the country through deregulation, privatization, cutting public expenditure for social services, etc. Inscribed in such logics were changes made to Santiago's planning legislations that favoured the development of a series of key high-rise buildings. Neoliberal agendas brought the corporate office tower to Latin America, which generated a lively discussion of stylistic issues, including the evaluation and promotion by some architects of postmodernist ideas.

By investigating the discursive tropes that influenced the design of a set of buildings in Santiago in this period and examining how architectural postmodernism as a movement and/or style filtered into Chilean architectural culture, this paper asks to what extent architectural postmodernism was an ideological correlative to neoliberalism in the context of post-1973 Chile.

The Prince and The Pauper: The Politics of Stirling's Irony

Joseph Bedford, Virginia Tech

In a 1971 lecture at The Cooper Union, Peter Eisenman argued that James Stirling's Leicester Engineering Building was exemplary for its capacity to invert the expected

meanings of materials common to the Modern Movement. More than a decade later, Leicester's 'double-coding' would lead one critic to proclaim the building's 'Postmodern Role.' It has since become commonplace to see Leicester as marking the end of Stirling's earnest faith in the Modern Movement as a project of social emancipation and to see the Harlequin-like Olivetti training school as marking the beginning of his role as postmodern ironist.

Stirling's ironic turn has often been attributed to either the mounting crisis of Modernism in the atmosphere of faltering economics and his mourning over the death of the welfare state, or to the architect's break-up with James Gowan and thus his liberation from Gowan's more functionalist pieties.

This paper, however, argues that Stirling's irony was a function of his biography and, in particular, his encounter with the problem of class mobility in the face of the rigid hierarchies of British social life. As such, Stirling's life and career was symbolic of a broader generational experience in Britain, in the later third of the twentieth century. The paper shows, in particular, that Stirling's irony was triggered by his marriage, in 1966, to Mary Shand, a member of the British aristocracy, and family relation of Camilla Shand, the future lover of Prince Charles. After 1966, Stirling was forever curious about his ascent from pauper to prince, and yet forever fatally excluded from becoming true aristocracy. Thus, it could be said that the double coding of his aesthetic language was a mediation of the double pull of high and low culture in the architect's own life, and in British society in general.