

Thursday, 14 June
9.00-11.45

Track: Roundtable
Room: *National Library, Miller Salon*

WHO (STILL) NEEDS EASTERN EUROPE?

Chair: Carmen Popescu, Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Bretagne, Rennes
Discussants: Irina Tulbure, Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism, Bucharest
Alina Serban, Bucharest National University of Arts

Eastern Europe made a late appearance in the architectural historiography. Ironically, Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture* (1896), which distinguished between 'historical' and 'non-historical' architecture, was one of the first (and rare) surveys to mention examples from the region, including them in the second category.

It took almost one century to integrate Eastern Europe in the historiographical discourse, following the dismantling of the Communist bloc (1989–1991) which, parallel to the paramount reframing of global geopolitics, had also triggered a remapping of the art and architectural history territories. This late integration was accomplished through a series of narratives. On the one hand, by emulating the prolific studies in Nationalism and Identity, scholars interested in the region used its marginality to their advantage by analysing its architecture in terms of idiosyncrasy. On the other hand, the Cold War progressed as a powerful field of study, which came to be seen in the following years as the most relevant perspective for looking at the region. Hence, Eastern Europe was assimilated to its recent history—as a significant part of the Communist bloc—and its architecture was studied as a by-product of this, insisting both on its politicization and its ordinariness. More recently, the Spatial turn brought a complexification of this understanding and of its geopolitical implications, giving more room for a comparative approach that questioned the polarized frame of the Cold War by expanding its territory and thus introducing the Third World in an analysis founded on transfers and circulation.

Paradoxically, this (disputable) integration led to a change in the very concept of Eastern Europe. Its progressive dilution within the more or less dominant discourse could be understood as an indicator of the relative success of the historiographical assimilation. If such a withdrawal is justifiable—the fear of the limitation inherent to all area studies, the belief in a 'global' history, etc.—it still shows a certain methodological turn.

The roundtable aims to debate this withdrawal and proposes an analysis of its causes and consequences. Is it still useful to refer to a geo-historical concept when writing an architectural history that aspires more and more to be transversal and inclusive? And if so, how is it possible to make such a concept recover both its historical dimension and the acuteness of its particularities? By taking Eastern Europe as a (valid) pretext, the roundtable questions the current mechanics of architectural historiography.

POSITION PAPERS:

Eastern Europe Is Not the Center or the Periphery
Kimberly Zarecor, Iowa State University

As Larry Wolfe reminds us, the edge of Europe is somewhere in the middle of Russia and "Eastern Europe" is an invention of eighteenth-century intellectuals. Locating the division between civilization and backwardness in Prussia and along the schism of Germanic and Slavic languages, these intellectuals set up a framework for interpreting Europe that remains with us today. Until World War II, this division was about perceptions of an urban, industrialized West and a rural, agricultural East. There was no definitive mark where the West ended and the East began. Consensus came only after 1945 as the definitive categorization of the East became countries aligned with the Soviet Union or a ruling Communist Party.

The clarity of this Cold War terminology has now faded. Architectural historians succeeded in bringing attention to Eastern Europe in the 1990s. First as a missing history of the avant-garde, and then back into nineteenth-century national identity formation and forward to postwar Stalinism and industrialization. This aligned with a disciplinary move toward postwar research and, for a time, Communist countries had the appeal of being the unknown. We are now in the midst of another shift, the re-marginalization of Eastern Europe on the same terms as in the eighteenth century. As the Global South has become the focus of intense scholarly attention, Europe and North America have become the normative center, but only some of this territory matters. The perception that Eastern Europe is still backward, trying to catch up to the West after decades of communism, means that it cannot be fully representative of the European experience. It is neither the center, nor the celebrated other, so it is marginal and overlooked. The methodological question is where to go from here and how to re-situate the region and its historiographic concerns within the discipline.

Local? Global?: The Power to Define Conceptual Categories

Veronica E. Aplenc, University of Philadelphia

As noted, since the 1990s scholars have sought to reconceptualize Eastern Europe, foregrounding its particular characteristics along new lines while simultaneously pushing it aside as a category of analysis in favor of greater paradigms. Importantly, this work countered the peripheral status historically assigned to Eastern Europe along geographic, disciplinary, and architectural production lines. However, the region's new position as both a generative, yet disappearing, analytical category raises important theoretical questions.

We must ask whether the focus on supra-local categories, such as national, transnational, and global, reifies Eastern Europe's historically peripheral status along existing lines by denying influence from regional scholarship on these very categories. Some would argue that Eastern Europe finds itself in the challenging position of not being "Other" enough to generate its own conceptual categories. For example, it stands in contrast to South Asia and subaltern studies. However, research findings from the region complicate this interpretation.

Eastern European cities reveal a complex understanding of the so-called national, global, and transnational within their specific contexts. Tarik Amar has demonstrated for 1950s Lviv that the application of Soviet practices allowed the city to develop along national lines. My research on Slovenia finds that Slovene planners embraced a local, highly bounded, focus for 1970s Ljubljana's development. In the first case, "national" is complicated by the socialist; in the second, it is a socialist configuration that is highly bounded, versus a "national" one. Both examples ask that we interrogate these categories from a local—or, to borrow an anthropological term, emic—perspective as they do not precisely mirror Cold War-era paradigms. This, in turn, asks researchers to reassess the position of Eastern Europe in a now unclear world order. Importantly, it also calls them to interrogate the nature of their own research and political positionality, as well as that of Eastern European colleagues.

Second World Urbanity: Beyond Area Studies Towards New Regionalisms

Daria Bocharnikova, Center for Fine Arts BOZAR / KU Leuven

Steven E. Harris, University of Mary Washington

The concept of Eastern Europe remains haunted by the orientalist vision, invented as early as the eighteenth century (Larry Wolff), of an underdeveloped and uncivilized neighbour of enlightened Western Europe. The scholarship of the past twenty years on Eastern Europe, including the history of architecture, has gone far to unmake this prejudice by showing the pan-European aspirations for modernity, including the agency of local architects, engineers and intellectuals in producing its unique visions. Although this

work contributes to the provincialising of the West, Eastern Europe lingers as an artificial tag lacking strong theoretical ambitions. Scholars typically use it as a professional marker, not as a theoretical model, to promote their research within an inherited area studies paradigm created by the Cold War. But is it really a useful tool today for writing global, comparative, and entangled histories of architecture? This paper argues in favor of inventing new terms that allow scholars to overcome the vocabulary of area studies. The task of writing global history reveals the necessity of thinking anew the multiple links between centers and peripheries, as well as overcoming the simplistic binary of center and periphery, and grasping more complex hierarchies of solidarities and competing universalisms. Among available alternatives to “Eastern Europe,” this paper explores the category of the “Second World” as a more useful term to capture the diversity—at times regional, national, or local—and the global implications of what architects and urban planners undertook in state socialisms. In this context, the presenters will discuss research under the umbrella of the Second World Urbanity project, which explores the architectural history and urban planning of socialist cities throughout the world, past and present, from Havana and Berlin to Tashkent and Dalian.

Reconsidering Eastern Europe from the Margins

Francisco Martínez, University of Helsinki

What kind of container is Eastern Europe? What is the contour and what is the content? We can also ask if Eastern Europe remains as a generative term to be retained in the present and even if it is nowadays used by the local population. Then, in terms of this conference, we can posit the question of its very usefulness in writing architectural history in the future, as this category emerged to answer to past political demands of the West and has lost value to face the global present. This position paper argues that there is an increasing need to analyse Eastern Europe in relation to the global present, and not as substantively defined based on past geopolitical vocabulary. I do not call however for the complete dismissal of the category, but rather to reflect on how it is losing value as an overarching framework. This essay is thus an invitation for learning how to view the region from different (temporal, spatial and scalar) perspectives, reflecting on how it reveals new vocabularies without leaving behind completely the old ones.

Defamiliarizing Formal Analysis: A New Methodology to Study Ordinary Modernism

Alona Nitzan-Shiftan, Technion – Israel Institute of Technology

The call provoking this roundtable insightfully argues that the powerful emergence of Cold War Studies had a dire effect on the architectural study of Eastern Europe—as it ‘was assimilated into its recent history’. But can we take exactly this point and push it further in order to eclipse the view of Eastern Europe as a ‘by-product’ of such sweeping global history, and instead explore the potentially unique position of Eastern Europe in articulating the form, space, and materiality of the ideas propelling this history?

Toward this end, this contribution to the roundtable suggests a methodological shift—to defamiliarize an old methodology of formal analysis. Instead of focusing on the aesthetic properties of particular styles, it is possible to conduct a careful formal analysis of ordinary mass produced modernism. Such analysis draws on the new focus on form in literary studies that refuses to separate between the formal and the socio-political. Instead of exploring exclusively the aesthetic properties of form, scholars look at its affordance—the potential uses or actions latent in a particular form that arrange elements and therefore power relations in our environment.

If Eastern Europe was indeed a laboratory of ordinary modernism, the site where the social aspects of the modern experiment were nearing its radical ends, then a careful study of this radical ordinary modernism can yield insights into one of the most intriguing questions of modernism’s dissemination: how could formally related practices implicate diverse, often contradictory political legitimizations and sustain deep ideological differences? In other words, what are the relationships between aesthetic and political

forms, and what can the particularities of the Eastern European case—the radicalization of interwar experiments—teach us about different paths to globalization?