From Neo-Historicism to Capitalist Realism

"po·mo·stroika – Postmodern Theories, Practices and Histories in Central and Eastern Europe"

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The Hungarian Cultural Institute from the German capital, Collegium Hungaricum Berlin, hosted an international architecture conference in 17-18 April this year. 26 lecturers representing 12 countries participated in the event, which focused on postmodernism in Central and Eastern Europe, and shared a wide spectrum of interesting topics. The conference, aptly titled "po·mo·stroika – Postmodern Theories, Practices and Histories in Central and Eastern Europe" was initiated by a Budapest-based collective, *Translations of Modernism* (Transmodern) in cooperation with Paradigma Ariadné architecture office.

Translations of Modernism was founded in 2014 by young architects, urbanists and architectural historians under the auspices of KÉK, the Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Center, with the cooperation of similar regional associations (4AM, Brno; Archimera, Bratislava; Małopolski Instytut Kultury, Krakow; Centrala, Warsaw; Bęc Zmiana, Warsaw). The idea to create a shared discussion platform was based on the realization that while shared experiences would ease up historical conflicts and assist appreciating one's own past, linguistic and cultural barriers, and a lack of publicly available research create a significant barrier in the common understanding of the region's architecture. After various workshops and smaller events, the collective organized its first international conference in Berlin in 2016, focusing on the phenomenon of "Socialist Modernism."

In 2018, the collective opted for a more timely topic. Recently, animated discussions on the heritage of postmodern architecture aroused globally. The controversial 2017 book by Terry Farrell and Adam Nathaniel Furman, *Revisiting Postmodernism* offers new perspectives on this very recent era the effects of which, in many senses, we still feel. The underlying hypothesis of the organizers was that for historical, political and economic reasons, a certain geographically specific version of architectural postmodernism might exist in the CEE countries, and if so, there are common traits of this phenomenon shared by practitioners in different countries. "While in the so-called West, an omnipresent ideal of comparison, the failure of the modernist utopia and rediscovery of Classical forms meant a new surge of interest towards stability, security and strength, in Central and Eastern Europe this often meant the opposite: exploration of the unknown and the unusual. Later, after 1989, postmodernism became openly associated with the rise of capitalism and the promise of democratic transformation."

A part of the lectures dealt with the problematic aspect of postmodern architecture as legacy. With the aim to understand this "uncomfortable" or "dark heritage," Giorgia Aquilar from the Technische Universität München presented her research as a potential framework. Examples for postmodernism as the chosen expression of economic change, aka "capitalist realism" from the Czech Republic and Poland were outlined by researchers Jana Pavlová and Kacper Kępiński with examples of bank buildings and the headquarters of the National Insurance Company. Barbora Tribulová, a faculty member of the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava offered rare

insights into the evolution of post-modern architecture in Slovakia, highlighting an elevated role of Imre Makovecz in the process, thus surprising even the Hungarian members of the audience. Both the tarnished construction history of the House of the People and the current problems of researching, processing and interpreting such a heavy legacy became clear when listening to the lecture of Bucharest-based architect Radu Tudor Ponta. These actual constructions were contrasted in the lecture of Giacomo Pala; the Innsbruck-based architect and researcher showcased the radical innovativeness of the Graz School.

Some speakers successfully reanimated the daily life of a long lost reality: Ábel Mészáros introduced the audience to the surprisingly varied world of the late 1980s Hungarian prefab housing, while Helena Kernan taught the meaning of the Russian word халтура (*khaltura* – shoddy construction work). A section was dedicated to research projects loosely connected to architecture. Dániel Kovács talked about the pop cultural layers of the Rubik's Cube, this phenomenal object designed by architect Ernő Rubik which in spite of being a universal design object became a symbol of the era. Gyula Muskovics and Andrea Soós from Hungary showcased Tamás Király's work. The recently deceased underground fashion designer built up an unparalleled haute couture line in the 1980s based on architectural forms and heavy, sometimes explicit political symbolism. Kuba Snopek and Petro Vladimirov introduced a new international work-in-progress project, "Spectacle Squares," re-evaluating the role of Communist-time marching spaces as catalysts of democratic transition.

A colourful segment of the conference was provided with the section of the real-time practitioners. Lately, postmodernism became a new catchphrase in contemporary architecture, thanks to architects born after its heydays, in the 1980s and 1990s. This section was also interesting because it abandoned geographical limitations. A central figure of this phenomena, US-based architect and educator Andrew Kovacs, presented his ever-growing online research project, the "Archive of Affinities". Kovacs's attempt to establish a new architecture, not on aesthetic principles, but by re-evaluating the planning tools, methods and materials, gained significant popularity in the digital world, but is yet to be manifested in an actual building. On the contrary, Porto-based FALA Atelier has a long list of realized edifices. Founding member Ana Luísa Soares explained the everyday practice of the office, characterized by a specific world of patterns, colours, spatial qualities and forms. Ironically, she mentioned, while FALA's work is not too well received in their hometown, their practice is seen abroad as somewhat typically Portuguese. Hungarian architects Attila Csóka, Szabolcs Molnár, and Dávid Smiló, representing Budapest-based Paradigma Ariadné, introduced a Central European example for the current postmodern trend, although their 'anti-establishment' approach originates more in doubting certain customs and habits than actual affiliation with Postmodernism. As part of this contemporary section, Matteo Vianello and Andrea Cusanno, students of the Venice University introduced the magazine *Carnets*, a rare collection of interviews with 15 young European practices.

The existence of humour and irony in postmodernism served as a central topic of some lectures and the following Q&As. While Andrew Kovacs or Ana Luísa Soares acknowledged a certain playfulness of their work (by his own account, Kovacs is "simply having fun"), historical lectures challenged the aspect of funniness, especially in the CEE countries, where, it seems, practitioners of postmodernism took themselves seriously. In her lecture about East Germany, Kirsten Angermann explained this with the then-contemporary rejection of postmodernism as the flair of Late Bourgeoisie – while GDR constructions, bearing the same approach, were seen stylistically as "adaptive historicist" or simply "neo-historicist." After analysing the contemporary theoretical debate, Angermann argued that this awareness is due to the fact that the East German government publicly identified itself with functionalism. Vilnius-based Martynas Mankus added a side-note to this theory, as he contrasted post-modern public spaces as "festive, joyful, optimistic spaces" with late soviet existence, "the society of boredom."

Another interesting regional character feature, it seems, is that stylistic elements in some cases expressed political content, such as in the case of 1980s religious architecture in Poland. Glasgow-based researcher Florian Urban introduced the case of Marek Budzyński and his Ascension

Church in Ursynów, Poland, where the chosen architectural language referenced the 17th century heydays of Poland. (As acknowledged by the lecturer, his research was based partially on the pioneering research project "Architecture of the VII Day" by Kuba Snopek and others, which was introduced at the 2016 conference.) According to Urban, while postmodernism helped initiate a debate about totalitarian thinking in Germany and served as an Anti-Bourgeois tool in Italy, its role in Poland as a conduit for bottom-up, anti-Communist messages contrasts with its widely accepted meanings. According to several lecturers, "Socialist Postmodernism" tends to be not a critical movement, as opposed to the hegemony of modernism, but a multifaceted experience to supplement it. The ironic aspect of postmodernism is based on the then-contemporary negative connotations of the word itself, said Andor Wesselényi-Garay. The Hungarian researcher presented his categorization of Post-WW2 Hungarian architecture, in which postmodernism is well-integrated into existing systems.

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