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Repenser les limites : l'architecture à travers l'espace, le temps et les disciplines
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Introduction

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Introduction

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In Wajda's *Man of Marble* (1976), Agnieszka, a future film director, goes to Nowa Huta, looking for information on a socialist "working class hero" of the 1950s. She crosses the town with her film crew, contemplating its architecture: repeated solemn Stalinist *cvartals* followed by the dynamic composition—a horizontally developed façade—of an office building. While the camera sweeps over the architectural landscape, the soundtrack changes: a heroic choir plays a patriotic song (a hymn of the new man, one could imagine); all of a sudden, pop music bursts out in a shaky rhythm. The first is employed as the perfect materialization of Socialist Realism (itself being seen as the incarnation of Communism); the second, as the sign of modernity—furthermore, the windows arranged in horizontal bands and the *pilotis* of the office building are a relevant sign of Modernist architecture (equivalent to the dynamic Western world). This juxtaposition condenses the polarized vision that divided the world in two, employing architecture as a materialized symbol: the rigid solemnity of the totalitarian ideology versus the modernity and progress of a democratic society. Immobility (understand repression) versus flexibility (understand freedom): East versus West.

Were these two worlds so clearly separated, forming an antagonistic binomial? Were their frontiers so evident? In reality, things were more complicated, as Wajda's film subtly proves. A Polish girl of the 1970s, dressed all in jeans, crossing an industrial town founded in the Stalinist years. Two unmistakable emblems of the Western and the Eastern worlds.

"We are the builders of the new world," proclaimed the poems and songs in the communist bloc."[1] This was an epitome of the Communist mythology that all the posters of the time conveyed: a new world, built by a new man. A paradigm of materialist dialectics: the new man builds the new world, while he is forged himself by the very process of building. Thus, the image of the builder became a symbol, used by Socialist Realist rhetoric as well as by Thaw imagery. Architecture laid the foundations of the new world and was expected to materialize both the promises of the communist regime and its achievements. As a public art, architecture offered the best propaganda image of the regime. Not only did Socialist architecture represented a show-window of

its accomplishments, but it also (and particularly) gave a concrete image of its goals and ideology. However, as Hannah Arendt noted, ideological thinking emancipates itself from the reality we perceive, insisting on a "truer" reality.[2] A reality coming "truer," hence better, each day, since this architecture represented the living frame of the population and embodied the directive principles exhorted by the political leaders. Thus, socialist architecture was unequivocally associated with the power and with the realm of politics.

In this perspective, the image of the builder becomes that of the supreme guide, the party leader himself. In a perfect totalitarian system, all men have become One Man.[3] By the metaphoric suggestion of the dialectics, this One Man is ideally the leader, who incarnates all his fellow citizens. The man is one with his work: the leader is not only the inspirer of the titanic architectural transformations, he is also the architect of Communism. This confused perception—between the agents of power and their monumental incarnation[4]—has its origin in the power of the rhetoric, both in terms of discourse and of imagery. Men are conditioned beings[5]: "The remnants of Marx," writes Milan Kundera, "no longer form any logical system of ideas, but only a series of suggestive images and slogans (a smiling worker with a hammer . . . the dove of peace rising to the sky . . .); we can rightfully talk of a gradual, general, planetary transformation of ideology into imagology."[6] An imagology so powerful that it alters the primary sense of the motifs employed: the rising sun is necessarily the light of Communism illuminating the entire globe.

Building a new world meant, inevitably, drawing its limits. Boundaries are, in general, complex concepts, both isolating and linking territories and ideas. There are real borders and imagined ones and this latter could be, sometimes, more effective. As mental projections, imagined borders deal with supra-identity, thus reinforcing the effects of inclusion or exclusion of real borders. The Iron Curtain was first of all such an ideological barrier, more operative than the electrical and barbed wires.

Communist ideology was about raising and transcending limits.[7] On the one hand it built barriers—its opposition to capitalism divided the globe in two blocs; on the other hand, it broke them, attempting to unite the world under the banner of the Comintern. Inside the Communist bloc, the borders were supposedly erased, since it was imagined as a transnational community, following on a larger scale the model of the Soviet Union. The architecture connected to Communist ideology raised and transcended barriers, too. It raised the Berlin Wall, the embodiment of the *nomos*, the Greek wall-like law[8]: a sacred law delimiting a political enclosure. But Socialist architecture also attempted to transcend barriers: by aiming to build a new moral for the new world—aiming for the Truth and the Beauty materialized in palaces for the people; or by dreaming to overpass the limits of progress. Whatever its ideals were, architecture of the former Communist countries blurred the limits between private and public. Through the "socialization of man,"[9] privacy was invaded by a public perspective and controlled by the political realm.

Communist ideology had real borders, but also generated imagined ones. Pulling the Iron Curtain after World War II, and thus creating a polarized world, was an act whose consequences have not yet disappeared. Its effectiveness and authoritative impact was due less to the real borders separating the Communist bloc from the capitalist one, than to the imagined limit drew by the power of ideology. The Iron Curtain was first of all such an ideological border, more operative than the electrical and barbed wires.

Due to the imagined borders, reality was differently perceived in the two blocs. Thus, *space* and *time* referred to different notions, too. "We had problems with time and space," confessed the Russian artist and writer Yuri Sobolev.[10] In the Western world, space represented a continuum that one could freely explore; in the Communist bloc space was clearly delimited, circumscribed. Frontiers were not the only limits to separate the two worlds; laws helped them in fact, as happened with the information blockade imposed during the late 1960s in Czechoslovakia. The polarized vision often turned the space beyond these limits into a fantastic place—like the blank zones out of the mapped world—a territory where anything could happen. "We were living in an isolated, curiously indeterminate space," wrote Sobolev. "Like the irresolvable contradiction of Zenon where the arrow can neither be found where it is nor where it is not. Normally we were in a third place: on a fictitious island in a virtual space, in another country. . . . An island is not only a blissful refuge in the ocean of an alien reality; it is also a place of solitude and seclusion."[11] However, this secluded space was not perfectly impermeable: it allowed "porosities," breaches that were manifest especially on its margins. While Tito's Yugoslavia represented the most significant example of a permeable place, freely communicating with the "West," it was not the only one. The Baltic republics, particularly Estonia, were a mythic locus of freedom in the imagination of the Muscovites. In another manner, the German Democratic Republic embodied such a place of porosity. Svetlana Boym recalls how extraordinary her 1976 trip to East Germany was: "Most impressive of all was our trip to Alexander Platz and Marx Engels Platz with the newly built palace of the Republic. We had never seen such a triumph of modern architecture that for me represented the West."[12] I was there one year later—a teenager coming from Romania—and I felt exactly the same.

The primary aim of the Communist bloc's borders—real or imagined—was isolation. A society that defined itself by opposition to the "old" (and obsolete) world—capitalism—needed a secluded space to build the "new world." The isolation effect was more visible in the first years after the Iron Curtain was pulled. These were the years of Socialist Realism, which imposed a specific language on all the satellite countries of the USSR. Under the banner of "socialist in content and national in form"—the famous slogan allegedly coined by Stalin himself—a monumental architecture, similarly solemn, rose throughout the Communist bloc. This architecture, bringing Truth and Beauty in the service of the masses, was explicitly conceived in opposition with the capitalist production. Instead of the "cold" efficacy of functionality—functionalism was a banned concept—of "bourgeois" architecture, Socialist Realism sought for an image able to express the grandeur of the Communist doctrine. This aesthetics was an undisguised instrument of propaganda, whose rhetoric concerned the Communist bloc as well as the capitalist one. As Hannah Arendt noted, propaganda is above all an instrument for convincing the other.[13]

A conviction that was however lacking among the architectural profession in the newly "converted" socialist countries. Hence, the gap between the discourse and the practice. Generations of modernists had to be convinced of the fundamentally erroneous vision of Modern Movement.

But the years of the Cold war had the same effect of isolation on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Complementing the Marshall Plan, the prestigious Museum of Modern Art coordinated a vast program of internationally circulating exhibitions. Openly anti-

communist, *American Design for Home and Decorative Use* and *Built in USA: Postwar Architecture* toured Western Europe for two years.

Isolation engendered fascination. It was a two-way fascination: "While pre-Soviet history and the Western world, forbidden under the communist regime, was a revelation and a new future for some former Soviet architects, Western architects were fascinated by the regime itself and everything it had created,"[14] as remarked the Ukrainian architect Bohdan Tcherkes.

Soviet leaders were perfectly aware of this double fascination when they have proposed to host the fifth Congress of the International Union of Architects in Moscow. The young members of the French delegation voiced this attraction, when they confessed that they came particularly to discover the architecture and architects of the USSR.[15] Decades later, contemplating Stalinallee in East Berlin, Aldo Rossi and Philip Johnson admired it as "the last remaining monument of European town-planning."[16].

In the heroic years, architecture in the Communist bloc appeared to Western architects as the embodiment of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne approach. The Thaw brought the feeling of fraternal collaboration. This attitude was already perceptible in the fourth Congress of the International Union of Architects in The Hague (in 1955), but particularly affirmed in the following meeting in Moscow, in 1958. "[Architects'] efforts—stated the resolution of the Moscow congress—would be vain without the collaboration of all the people in a spirit of mutual comprehension and in a world of peace."[17]

This workshop aims to offer if not a complex at least a more complete perception of the architecture of the former Communist bloc in the perspective of a polarized world. Its approach is to explore the borders of the divided world and, particularly, the mechanisms activating them. There will not be a unique or definitive conclusion, since the workshop aims to bring together the clear-cut and the blurry—like still images compared to a moving camera —which could complete each other by offering different perceptions. While dealing with certain clichés commonly associated with the Socialist world, the papers to be presented here will try to dismantle them.

NOTES DE FIN

1. Jörn DÜWEL, "Wir sind das Bauvolk," in Cor WAGENAAR and Mieke DINGS, eds., *Ideals in Concrete*, Rotterdam, NAI, 2004, pp. 53–58.

2. Hannah ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, San Diego/New York/London,Harcourt Inc., [1951], p. 470–71.

3. H. ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 467.

4. Svetlana BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, 2001, p. 89.

5. H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, Chicago,The University of Chicago Press, p. 9.

6. Milan KUNDERA, *Immortality*, London, Faber and Faber, 1991, p. 127.

7. Carmen POPESCU, "Borders of fact, borders of the mind," in Gabi Dolff-Bonekämper, ed., *Dividing Lines, Connecting lines—Europe's Cross-Border Heritage*, Strasbourg, 2004, pp. 109–116.

8. H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, pp. 63–64.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

10. Yuri SOBOLEV, "Virtual Estonia and No Less Virtual Moscow: an Essay on Island Mythology," in Laura HOPTMAN and Tomas POSPISZL,eds., *Primary Documents. A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, New York, 2002, pp. 15–28,p. 16.

11. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

12. S. BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 187.

13. H. ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 342

14. Bohdan TCHERKES, "The architectural identity of 'European suburbs': the perception of Ukraine," in *Ideals in Concrete*, pp. 59–64; p. 61.

15. A. G. HEAUME, "Ve Congrès de l'Union Internationale des Architectes – Moscou 20-27 juillet 1958," in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 1958 (September), pp. VII-XI.

16. DÜWEL, "Wir sind das Bauvolk," p. 53

17. A. G. HEAUME, "Ve Congrès de l'Union Internationale des Architectes – Moscou 20-27 juillet 1958."

INDEX

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