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Virág Molnár. Building the State: Architecture, Politics, and State Formation in Post-War Central Europe. London: Routledge, 2013. 210 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-62293-6.
Kimberly Elman Zarecor. Manufacturing Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945–1960. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011. 480 pp. ISBN 978-0-8229-4404-1.

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Architecture is one of the living legacies of Communism in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe. From Warsaw to Moscow, Belgrade to Bucharest, the built environment and urban culture continues to be shaped by the visions of socialist modernity developed by postwar architects and engineers. Yet, while popular culture and public intellectuals have celebrated and maligned Communist-era architecture to an equal degree (see Chaubin 2011; Litchfield 2014), historians have only recently begun to regard it as a legitimate object of study. Rather than exploring Communist-era theories and practices of construction and planning, scholars have paid greater attention to how urban space has been reclaimed and reconfigured by urban planners and citizens after 1989 (see Czepczynski 2008; Dmitrieva and Kliems 2009; Hirt 2012; Weszkalnys 2013). Indeed, until very recently the English-language literature on the subject of Communist-era architecture has been restricted to just a handful of volumes on the imposition of socialist realism in architecture (Åman 1992; Paperny 2002), urban histories (Crowley 2003; Pugh 2014), and anthropological studies of Communist-era cultures and ideologies of dwelling (Buchli 1999; Fehérváry 2013). As such, the studies recently published by Kimberly Zarecor and Virág Molnár constitute a welcome addition to what is still a relatively small field of academic scholarship. Presenting two extremely sensitive and nuanced readings of the development of architectural form and practice in the former GDR, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, they turn a much-needed critical eye on three less studied European architectural traditions. From this peripheral position, they very effectively challenge conventional readings of Communist-era planning and construction as a simple reflection of the ideological goals of the socialist nation state or the stylistic impositions from Moscow.

Despite their deceptively similar titles, these are two very different pieces of scholarship. A sociologist, Molnár is primarily interested in examining the relationship between architecture and processes of state formation during and immediately following the Cold War. Architecture, she insists, should be understood as more than merely a material reflection of social modernization and political power, but rather as a tool of political representation and an instrument of social reform deployed by the state to reform everyday life and produce novel political systems.

Rather than constructing a comprehensive historical narrative, Molnár presents four loosely interlinked case studies drawn from Germany (the GDR of the 1950s and post–1989 Berlin) and Hungary (in the 1960s and 1970s). Together, the essays demonstrate how architecture and urban planning have been "mobilized in the service of social change, first in socialist modernization and then in postsocialist transition" (2013:3), while providing a rough chronological overview of the development of key architectural paradigms during the period. However, Molnár's book is not simply an attempt to document the development of planning policies and ideological prescriptions of the East German and Hungarian Communist parties. Rather, it is a study of architectural practice and thought from within the field itself, a historical ethnography of the profession. Providing a sharp analysis of select professional debates, it sheds light on how architects in all four cases were forced not only to navigate the changing policies of the state but to mediate between international paradigms of architectural knowledge and local narratives about the proper role of architecture (and the architect) in society.

In contrast to Molnár's comparative project, Zarecor's study of domestic architecture and collective housing in postwar Czechoslovakia takes the more conventional format of a historical monograph. Like Molnár, Zarecor is interested more in studying intellectual debates and processes of change within the profession, rather than discussing the relative aesthetic merit of their material outcomes. Writing on the period from 1945 to 1960, she charts the brief dominance of socialist realism in Czechoslovak architecture and its swift replacement with a brand of architectural modernism more familiar to local architects in the late 1950s. Along the way, Zarecor challenges the commonplace assumption that planning policy and architectural directives were simply handed down from the Soviet leadership in Moscow. It was not the pressure to adopt socialist realist design principles that caused the greatest professional debate but the much deeper transformation of architectural practice from an individual, creative endeavor to a collective, industrial venture after the Communist takeover in 1948. Furthermore, she breaks down conventional chronologies of style, showing how ideas of typification and standardization prevalent in prewar Czech modernism were carried over into the building of Stalinist mass-housing projects. Indeed, she counters the common construction of a "break between high modernism and what came later [in] either 1938 or 1945" (2011:16), arguing that the social and political engagement of the prewar architectural avant-garde played a crucial role in the postwar transformation of the profession. Like Molnár, in other words, Zarecor is keen to emphasize the fact that the debates that characterized postwar Czechoslovakia's architectural practice were very much a product of their particular time and space.

It is precisely by resisting the temptation to frame their observations in terms of a center-periphery model that Molnár and Zarecor make their most valuable contributions. Focusing on the local, they are able to present the profession as a heterogeneous field of actors with a range of varied and conflicting responses to the postwar industrialization of architecture, as well as the experimentation with forms and materials it engendered. In two particularly strong chapters on Hungary, for example, Molnár shows how shifting notions of "tradition" and "modernity" informed professional debates across the 1960s and 1970s. Architectural paradigms, she argues, were pegged onto much older debates about modernity, pitching those who sought to emulate Western traditions against those advocating a special, Hungarian path to modernity (the "urbanist-populist" debate). Similarly, Zarecor's work is most interesting where it sheds light on the intellectual and political fault lines that emerged between Czechoslovak architects in the turbulent first decade of Communist rule. Noting that Czechoslovak architects, artists, and critics were already debating theories of collective architecture and standardized construction as far back as the 1920s, she documents how technocratic notions of modernism eventually won out over rival ideas of "emotional functionalism." Promoted, among others, by Jiří Voženílek—head of the Baťa architectural offices in Zlín before and during the Second World War—scientific functionalism was eventually adopted as doctrine, along with the novel technologies of construction and design already being developed by the company before the Communist takeover. Indeed, along with his colleagues Karel Janů and Jiří Štursa, it was Voženílek who became the most influential architect of postwar Czechoslovakia.

Together, Molnár and Zarecor paint a vivid picture of the conditions for architectural practice, artistic expression, and intellectual debate in Cold War Central Europe. Sensitively combining cultural, political, and architectural history, their studies form an excellent resource of knowledge on socialist-era architecture, design, and aesthetic practice, which will undoubtedly be of great use to historians of the region. Nevertheless, a few questions and concerns remain. Perhaps the most pressing one is the near absence of any serious consideration of the role of vernacular architecture in the region, beyond Molnár's exploration of the attitude of the Hungarian architectural establishment towards the one-family home. A material representation of the limitations of postwar architectural visions of socialist modernity, and the failings of the socialist command economy, such self-built architecture was nevertheless instrumental for the rapid postwar modernization of rural areas across Central Europe. Indeed, both authors choose to concentrate largely on state-led, urban housing projects; Zarecor, in particular, concentrating on architecture which met with the approval of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. This raises the additional question of what a study which included those projects that failed to gain official approval—or were deliberately designed against the state—might tell us about competing discourses on socialist modernity in the region. The rise of nonconformist "paper architecture" across the Soviet bloc in the 1970s, for example, indicates that architects in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the GDR at times sought to operate outside their national architectural establishments. Presenting an excellent analysis of the challenges and opportunities faced by postwar (and postsocialist) architects across Central Europe, Molnár and Zarecor have opened the door for further research on the production of designs and discourses outside the professional mainstream.

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