

Is there still something behind the Iron Curtain? Documentation and conservation of Modernism in former Eastern Europe

BY HENRIETA MORAVČÍKOVÁ

Last year, three volumes of the Monograph *East West Central Re-building Europe* were published, where Ákos Moravansky outlined the possibility of reinterpreting European architectural historiography¹. He drew attention to new processes, phenomena and contexts in the history of 20th century modern architecture. Through the mosaic of texts, the European architectural scene of the last century has been brought to the fore as a complex and still undiscovered structure. Although many 20th century phenomena have seen comparisons made across the European continent, divided by the former Iron Curtain for a half of the century, there is still room for confrontation and reconciliation. Firstly, because research continues, new contexts are emerging, the perspective of evaluation and the perception of the heritage of Modernism is changing, but also because, in addition to the artificial political structure of the Iron Curtain, which has disappeared along with the disappearance of the Eastern and Western Blocs, a number of constructs such as the territorial or thematic marginalization of parts of European architectural historiography remain to be overcome. After a long period of focusing on iconic personalities and works of architecture it is time to concentrate on thematic research, which will illustrate connections and differences in the Modern Movement of Europe and worldwide. In the sense of this ambition the sense of this tradition, our aim is to draw attention to personalities, works, phenomena, or processes that have so far failed to gain traction in international discourse but which we nevertheless consider important in relation to a comprehensive view of history and the protection of modern architecture.

docomomo International can be considered as one of the first, if not the first, platforms to offer a place, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, to an equal approximation of the research positions of former Western and Eastern Europe.

This trend is obvious within the activities of scholars gathered in frame of the **docomomo** international. Since early 1990s they have prepared several international conferences, exhibitions and publications discussing common topics and intentionally crossing the former iron curtain. Lets mention some monothematic issues of international peer reviewed journals such as the British *The Journal of Architecture*, the Slovakian *Architektúra & Urbanizmus* or the Polish journal *Herito*. One of the

very first initiatives came from the side of the journal *Architektúra & Urbanizmus* in 2003². Based on the results of the international project *Modern Movement Neighbourhood Cooperation*, the editorial board prepared a monothematic issue focused on modern concepts of living and work illustrated by examples from Finish Sunila, Italian Ivrea, Danish Bellevue and Slovak Baťa town Partizánske. In 2009 French scholar Carmen Popescu edited an issue of *The Journal of Architecture* that was devoted to the architecture of the former Communist Bloc³. Only one year later the issue of the journal *Architektúra & Urbanizmus* dedicated to the problems of protection and restoration of Modern Movement architecture was published. Under the title “Modern Architecture as Heritage”, the leading scholars from seven **docomomo** chapters presented the latest state of art in their countries⁴. In 2012 “Mass Housing” was thematised by the same journal bringing together current research results in ten European countries. The Polish journal *Herito* published by the International Cultural Centre in Krakow focuses regularly on topics that reflect the common European cultural heritage of 20th century. Lets mention the Number 17-18 titled “Cold War Modern Architecture” or the Number 22-23 with the title “The City as a Work of Art”⁵.

For the first time after the fall of Iron Curtain in the late 1980s **docomomo Journal** is completely devoted to the research, documentation and conservation of works of modern architecture in the countries of former Eastern bloc. Texts written by scholars from Czech Republic, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia give readers the opportunity to learn about the state of the art in the field of architecture historiography and monument protection of the Modern Movement in these countries. Reviews of books and exhibitions even underline the variety and richness of the research carried out in Eastern European countries. It is obvious that these investigations and presentations are closely related with the general discussion on the Modern Movement. A strong need for completing and deepening the knowledge in the field of Modern Movement historiography, new interest in biographical research and the social context of architecture characterize a number of the presented studies. We should mention the remarkable investigation of the generally less-known Hungarian architectural journal *Tér és Forma* by Pál Ritoók and Ágnes

Sebestyén. That journal has shaped the local discussion on the Modern Movement in interwar Hungary and, although it only lasted a decade, it influenced Hungarian architecture historiography of a whole century. Interesting for the international audience might be the process of rediscovering of life and work of the architect Friedrich Weinwurm. Weinwurm used to be an influential personality of the Modern Movement in Central Europe, but was nearly completely forgotten after the WWII. Worth mentioning also is the research on the extraordinary achievements of Czech architecture in the process of modernist occupation of the landscape in the 1960s and 1970s done by Petr Vorlík.

Nevertheless, there is a considerable number of investigations included in this issue that reach slightly beyond the general discussion. It is visible especially in the case of topics that arose from local contexts, as, for example, the underestimation of post-war Modernism because of its relation with the era of socialism, the overestimation of the liberal economy and free market in the field of monument protection or the general lack of public finances. These contexts generated specific local positions and solutions that might be either inspiring or rather deterrent.

As an inspiring and promising local solution we should mention the conversion of the synagogue (Peter Behrens, 1931) to a gallery and concert hall in the Slovak town of Žilina based on voluntary work and fundraising. The strategy of conservation as an “open work” that was applied there, and as discussed in the contribution by Katarína Haberlandová, could serve as an inspiration for other endangered works of architecture lacking the resources for a standard conservation process. We should also stress the series of investigations on social and mass housing introducing, not only the regional histories of this phenomenon, but also its original and contemporary social background. This is especially obvious in the actual social conditions of mass housing projects in post-communist countries which represent an important counterpart to the discussions on this topic in the West. Most striking among these examples is the city of New Belgrade that represents a unique completed effort to build a new socialist city using the tools of Modernism and the planned economy. Jelica Jovanović discusses in her contribution whether and how such a project could be sustainable in the current neoliberal context. More doubts on the future of another typical product of Modernism — collective housing — are expressed in the study of Czech architecture by historian Hubert Gúzik. He argues that this unique legacy is paradoxically denied both from the side of socialist and liberal elites. The same goes for the architecture of post-war Modernism in all of the post-communist countries that generally represents marginalized or endangered heritage. One of the most exciting parts of the postwar heritage of post-communist countries are the memorial sites of national liberation that were built after 1945 under the ideological curatorship of the Communist party. This is especially the case in the former Yugoslavia where they are not only manifestations of a particular ideology but also of the strong movement of modern abstraction in art and architecture. Despite this fact,

these monuments are generally neglected and ignored, as Vladana Putnik Prica and Nenad Lajbenšperger posit it in their article. Nevertheless, there are already examples of successful conservation and renewal of postwar modernist architecture behind the former Iron Curtain. One of them might be the iconic complex of the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava (Vladimír Dedeček, 1979) that is currently undergoing restoration. Slovak architecture historian, Peter Szalay, discusses in his essay the challenges and pitfalls of this process.

In most of the countries of former Eastern Europe industrial architecture has also been recognized as a part of the cultural heritage only recently. Slovenian architect Sonja Ifko focuses on the slow change of the status of industrial heritage and illustrates this process with some cases of successful adaptive reuse.

Despite the many new discoveries, interesting insights and good examples, most of the contributions are accompanied by a certain scepticism that grows out of the discontinuity of social development and unstable research conditions in this region. This feeling of frustration is most present in the text of well-known Hungarian scholar András Ferkai, who argues that Hungarian Modern Movement architecture is of no interest to anyone, neither to a local nor an international audience. Despite this typical Central European scepticism, we have to state that this monothematic issue could be understood as a confirmation of an important assumption regarding the character of the Modern Movement. All of the manifestations of the Modern Movement discovered or rediscovered behind the former Iron Curtain confirm the position of the Modern Movement as a solid and very European phenomenon.

Notes

- 1 Ákos Moravánszky and Judith Hopfengärtner (ed.), *Re-Humanizing Architecture, New Forms of Community, 1950–1970*, Bazilej, Birkhäuser Verlag, 2017; Ákos Moravánszky and Karl R. Kogler (ed.), *Re-Scaling the Environment, New Landscapes of Design, 1960–1980*, Bazilej, Birkhäuser Verlag, 2017; Ákos Moravánszky and Torsten Lange (ed.), *Re-Framing Identities, Architecture's Turn to History, 1970–1990*, Bazilej, Birkhäuser Verlag, 2017.
- 2 “Modern Concepts of Living and Work”, *Architektúra & Urbanizmus*, n. 3-4, Bratislava, 2003, 82-218.
- 3 “Behind the Iron Curtain: architecture in the former Communist Bloc”, *The Journal of Architecture*, n. 1, London, 2009, 1-160.
- 4 “Modern Architecture as Heritage”, *Architektúra & Urbanizmus*, n. 3-4, 2010, 180-387.
- 5 “Cold War Modern Architecture”, *Herito*, n. 17-18, Krakow, 2015, 1-308. “The City as a Work of Art”, *Herito*, n. 22-23, Krakow, 2016, 1-350.

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