

Is Eastern European Architecture Bound to Speak? On Matters of Peripherality and Representation

Carmen Popescu

This paper attempts to look at how the architecture of Eastern Europe – and consequently of its historiography – has made use of matters of ‘strategy’ and ‘tactics’ in articulating its discourse and narrative. In doing so, it intends to briefly explore what are the most appropriate historiographical tools when dealing with Eastern European architecture, and – hence – hopefully open a debate here on methodology.

I will refer to Eastern Europe in a broad geographical perspective whose limits are mostly determined by the idea of ‘otherness’, be it in the cultural sense forged by the Enlightenment – as showed Larry Wolff in his *Inventing Eastern Europe* –¹ or in the political sense induced by the polarization of the Cold War. This means that I will sometimes refer to different entities – Central Europe, Eastern Europe – in order to address similar situations in the architectural realm. Chronologically, I will start with the nineteenth century and the first decades of the following century, which will allow me to introduce the idea of contextualization that I will treat mainly through the lens of the socialist regimes.

Due to space limitations, the picture might be sometimes schematic, lacking not only details, but also important chronological fragments. However, the scope of this paper is not to offer an exhaustive view, but to change the way of looking at Eastern European architecture.

Speaking languages: contextualization matters

In 2006, the University of Chicago Press published a solid study, lavishly illustrated, entitled *When Buildings Speak*.² Its author, Anthony Alofsin, chose this metaphoric title to treat “Architecture as Language in the Habsburg Empire and Its Aftermath, 1867-1933”.

The author’s approach of treating identity as a methodological bias in studying Central/ Eastern European architecture,³ was not a new one. Scholars like Friedrich Achleitner and Ákos Moravánszky⁴ – to quote here only the most prominent – had already

investigated this perspective in several works. What is striking in Alofsin’s book is the way ‘meaningfulness’ turns into a crucial concept in decoding an architecture which, due to its “otherness”, has but a “limited ability to speak to us now”.⁵ The idea of architecture as language is at the core of the structure of the book, each chapter exploring a different facet of this metonymy. Hence, “The Language of History” is followed by “The Language of Organicism” and “The Language of Rationalism”, the entire picture being completed by “The Language of Myth” and “The Language of Hybridity”. By translating the core notion of the Herderian theory – all national culture is based on a specific language –, Alofsin succeeded both in introducing the Western reader to the largely unknown architecture of Central Europe and in confirming the marginal position of this latter which – once again – needed a code in order to be understood.

Two important things are at stake here. As a periphery, Central Europe – and it is ironic to note that something which is labeled as “central” has such a marginal place in the current mainstream discourse – requires contextualization. The set of maps at the beginning of the book is the first tool of contextualization, situating the object of the study. Seemingly, a map is a ‘neutral’ instrument of knowledge, a useful ‘prop’ for the discussed notions; however, its presence reveals a lack of background, indicating a certain theoretical marginality of the object. Thus, in Alofsin’s book, geographical situation comes together with conceptual contextualization. The concepts that the author proposes as pivotal notions of each chapter – History, Rationalism, Organicism, etc. – form the basis of his methodology. Their function is not only to bring meaning to an uncategorized architecture (because not taken in account by the mainstream discourse), but also – and this is equally important – to create connections with the methodology of the prevailing historiography. These connections are meant to establish parallels with the Western context, both in terms of the architectural currents and of (and here their role



Anthony Alofsin, *When Buildings Speak. Architecture as Language in the Habsburg Empire and Its Aftermath, 1867-1933*, University of Chicago Press, 2006

is even more important) the operativeness of a similar methodology. Peter Collins' *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture*,⁶ a central study for modernist historiography, employs similar concepts in articulating the different chapters of his book. These treat Romanticism, Revivalism (a chapter dealing with several crucial styles in establishing architectural identity in the nineteenth century), Functionalism, Rationalism, etc. Moreover, the chapter on functionalism addresses several types of architectural analogies, among which are discussed the biological and the linguistic analogy.

The predicament of approaching (geographical and theoretical) peripheries was not new for Alofsin. a close collaborator of Liane Lefaivre and Alexandre Tzonis in their early years of elaborating the theory of 'critical regionalism' in the late 1970; he had contributed to the advancement of this study. So, one could say that it was not Central Europe that opened Alofsin's eyes to the concept of identity, but the other way around. It was his interest in identity, derived from critical regionalism, that led him to Central Europe – a region commonly seen as the battleground of national cultures. Addressing a topic such as identity in architecture is undoubtedly a strategy of visibility, most often associated to (cultural) peripherality. Developed in the nineteenth century, under the pressure of Hegelian historicity, the architectures of identity were meant to create an idiosyncratic filiation for those peoples which were not already seen as part of the large taxonomic picture of (valuable) cultures. The result of this quest for identity, expressed either as 'national styles' or as assimilated models of Western modernity, was not deprived of ambiguity. While the aspiring Nation-States were propelled into the 'bigger picture', they were meanwhile stamped as marginal due to the yet unachieved meaningfulness of their identity. In Eastern Europe, that was the predicament that faced generations of architects: how to position themselves in order to build up a (meaningful) place for their nation on the geopolitical map.

From a stigma – uncivilized cultures eventually creating an image of specific culture – identity was progressively turned afterwards into a strategy of visibility. Being specific – or better said, being finally specific – represented not only a strategy of integration, but also an attempt at positioning within the mainstream. And indeed, this strategy proved to be in many cases successful in terms of architecture – as showed, to take two different examples, Jože Plečnik and Károly Kós – and instrumental in terms of historiography. Nevertheless, the thus acquired visibility was a poisonous gift: what was meant to render the otherness acceptable nonetheless stamped it as different.

Hence, one could also argue that when Alofsin articulated his approach as almost a response to Collins' he might have intended to escape this vicious circle affecting the territories ignored by the dominant discourse in historiography.

Still speaking? Architecture in Eastern Europe during the Cold War

The marginality of Eastern Europe, as we still experience it today, was actually enhanced (if not forged) during the Cold War. The remains of a cultural peripherality, which had been in many cases almost wiped away, were in those years turned into an ideological peripherality. The political polarization meanwhile extended the territory of alterity to what was coined as the 'Soviet bloc'.

That it was not a bloc is well-known by now. However, the Iron Curtain was not only an expressive image but functioned, in most situations, as an efficient barrier within a polarized world. Its claimed opacity (which is debatable from today's perspective) served to enhance the definition of political alterity. This ideological marginalization, in a time when the world was extending far beyond the former borders and its map was filling up with new peripheries, had consequences in both architecture and historiography. In terms of of new peripheries and tactics of centrality, Eastern Europe in certain circumstances managed to reframe geopolitical



Vladimír Dedeček, the new wing of the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava (1967-79).
Photo: Carmen Popescu, 2013

dynamics, exporting its expertise and creating new alliances – particularly within the ‘Non-Aligned’ group – and thus placing the Second World as an intermediary between the First and the Third on the international scene. However, this tactical positioning hardly affected the architectural discourse of the Cold War years, where the Third World more often found place, due to Western architects’ interventions, than Eastern Europe.

Excluded from Western historiography, which admitted only “absolute values” – to quote Bruno Zevi –,⁷ Eastern European architects were also politically confronted with trends from the capitalist world judged inappropriate for building socialism. In this context, architecture behind the Iron Curtain was constrained to develop an idiosyncratic approach. From Socialist Realism to postmodernism, most of the official architectures in Eastern Europe were bound to convey a message. And even if Socialist Realism was meant to oppose the ‘cold’, ‘morally corrupted’ capitalist architecture, while postmodernism was more or less synchronized with the Western scene, this message dissimulate the same content. It was about a meaningful architecture, one able to create values – if not what was considered as a value on the Western side, then at least its own values.

This search for meaningfulness developed strategies of visibility which favored, even if not explicitly presented as such, images of identity. I do not mean by that that it aspired to create a harmonized architectural identity of the entire bloc – though, for a short interval, Socialist Realism came, almost all over behind the Iron Curtain, to embody a common identity of a new world. My point is that meaningfulness as a value provided such an identity.

Leaving Socialist Realism aside – though its well-known slogan ‘national in form, socialist in content’ represents a clear species for identity in architecture –, I would like to look at two other cases: what I call Socialist brutalism and postmodernism. Both these currents were initially developed in reaction to the crisis of modernism; but even if architects in the

Eastern bloc were not unfamiliar with these theoretical debates, here these currents came to embody a certain image of officialdom. Both provided tools that served the official ideology perfectly: monumentality on the one hand, and a connection to tradition and history – both values cherished by the communist ideology – on the other. Meanwhile, their criticism against modernism appealed to the party ideologists in certain countries of the bloc, even if what was later called Socialist modernism was developed in all of Eastern Europe. Moreover, while Socialist modernism was often assimilated to the monotonous and minimalist aesthetics of mass-housing, brutalism and postmodernism displayed daring geometries and symbolic elements.

Seen from this perspective, it is not surprising that brutalism and postmodernism were more successful in countries with a strong tradition in identity issues, like Slovakia, Bulgaria or Romania. Henrieta Moravčíková, who extensively researched these forms of monumental late socialist architecture in Slovakia,⁸ showed that without being exclusively the product of a political demand, the monumental appetite of the architecture in the 1960s-1970s was supported by a strong political will whose expectations it satisfied. The 1968 Law of Federation, stipulating equality between the Czech and Slovak parts of the republic, encouraged the development of identity issues which, as a matter of fact, already had important roots in Slovak art. Among many examples of this quest for monumentality stands the new wing of the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava, by Vladimír Dedeček (1967-79), whose expressive volumes of the street façade provide a dialogue in time with the Neo-Renaissance Esterházy palace (built in the 1870s), which hosted the gallery since its foundation in 1949. Moravčíková states that the powerful expressionism of brutalist architecture was instrumentalised by the Communist government both as a vector of Slovak identity and as a demonstration of democracy, since the same architecture – abstract in the majority of the cases – was used also by the capitalist West.



Abstraction was not really what motivated either the Romanian Nicolae Porumbescu or the Bulgarian Nikola Nikolov in their approach towards a Socialist brutalism.⁹ After a (late) modernist phase, Porumbescu moved to a new orientation which made a ground-breaking effect in mid-1960s Romania, at a time when the political leaders were themselves looking to renew the ideological discourse. He thus opened the path for a Romanian brutalism, whose “lyrical nationalism” was founded – as Porumbescu declared – both on the latest tendencies in Western architecture (he quoted Le Corbusier, Tange) and on the Romanian national genius (Brancusi, Enescu, with whom he associated the Romanian peasant).¹⁰ This massive interpretation of Western trends and Romanian folklore – as illustrated by his series of Houses of Culture – seduced the Party ideologues, who saw in his approach an excellent means of expressing the new line of nationalist politics. Henceforth, this type of architecture came to embody the official image.

A similar ideological background is to be found in Nikolov’s architecture: his Veliko Turnovo hotel (1967), built in the city with the same name, counts among the most appreciated and reproduced Bulgarian buildings from the communist times. What appears as a clever interpretation of the architectural context – Veliko Turnovo being one of the most picturesque and historically rich Bulgarian towns, which had actually highly impressed the young Le Corbusier during his *Voyage d’Orient* – might be read, in the same time, as a political statement. This connection to the site and the explicit symbolic language displayed by the hotel echo the nationalist politics led by the Bulgarian Communist Party in those years, a politics largely exploiting the discourse of a national past. The town of Veliko Turnovo, as the first capital of the Bulgarian Empire, occupied a crucial position in this narrative – and, as a matter of fact, not far from the hotel stands the monument of the Assenevtsi erected in 1985, a statuary group of vast dimensions, glorifying the

founders of the Second Bulgarian Empire. The populist, celebratory language of the sculpture suggested directly parallels with the proclaimed flourishing state of communist Bulgaria.¹¹

Going back to contextualization, how should the architectural historian interpret such examples of multi-layered symbolism? Could (s)he ignore or simply separate the real effect of the *Zeitgeist*, which pushed the architects from Eastern Europe to embrace brutalist and later postmodern precepts, from the political endorsement operated by folklore or historicist quotations? The three architects briefly discussed above were clearly driven by the desire to synchronize their work with the new trends developing on the other side of the Iron Curtain, in the world of ‘valuable’ architecture. By doing so, they aimed not only towards the formal aesthetics of these architectures, but also to their new degree of meaningfulness. While seeking alternatives for modernism’s crisis, examples like Chandigarh or Japanese architecture of the 1960s also overtly addressed identity issues. However, in the heavily politicized context of the communist bloc, this new meaningfulness was hardly separable from the State ideology.

Thus, contextualization is not a (simple) strategy of visibility for the architectural historian working on Eastern Europe: it is a prerequisite tool of analysis.

Back to contextualization: historiography of Eastern European architectures

Instrumentalizing architecture is neither a recent development and nor is it specific to socialist regimes. The fall of the Wall in 1989 did not totally erase it; on the contrary, in several circumstances, it appeared enhanced both by the rising nationalist tendencies and by the (same) aspiration for geo-cultural visibility. The gigantic project of Skopje 2014, drawing inspiration from the architectural styles of Classic Antiquity, is an eloquent example in this sense, being meant to affirm the national pride of the newly founded State after the dismantling of the

Slovak National Gallery:
view towards the Esterházy palace.
Photo: Carmen Popescu, 2013



Nicolae Porumbescu, the House of Culture in Suceava (1966-1969). *Arhitectura*, n° 4, 1969



Nicolae Porumbescu, the House of culture in Suceava (1966-1969): detail. *Arhitectura*, n° 4, 1969

former Yugoslavia.¹² Those interested in the urban and architectural transformations undertaken in this process of political reconstruction could certainly not discuss them without significantly using contextualization.

One could argue that the example of Skopje 2014 is too particular to be taken in account in assessing methodological matters related to Eastern Europe architecture(s). However, its ideological mechanisms and formal architectural vocabulary are in direct filiation with an entire architectural process (of identity) developed in Eastern Europe in the past two centuries.

But then, is contextualization the only manner to produce and speak about the architecture of this area?

I would argue that contextualization represented (and still does) a major tactical narrative, whose mechanics was activated by the positioning of the mainstream discourse, both in terms of architectural production and of historiography. If the major architectural surveys of the Cold War left aside, in most of the cases, the examples from this area, they did so not (only) for ideological reasons, but mainly because of the epistemology of their discourse, explicitly constructed on value hierarchies. The blank spot which marked (most of) Eastern Europe in mainstream historiography was the result of a lack of 'significance', in different respects, of the architectures produced here. In this sense, the rare occurrences referred to those Eastern European architectures related to the mainstream practice – otherwise said, to those examples bearing a certain significance.

Today, the obsession of being global, on the one hand, and the turn in the architectural historiography, on the other – the two being to a certain extent related – changed the perspective in terms of peripherality. However, the geopolitical mutations and the historiographical reassessments hardly changed the reading of the architectures

from Eastern Europe, which thus remain a marginal topic – one that still needs to be (heavily) contextualized in order to find a place in the now vast arena of mainstream historiography. Contextualization is required both by the 'ordinariness' of its (mass) production – which demands that the architectural historian integrates the approach and sensibility of the anthropologist or of the sociologist – and by the 'extraordinariness' of certain architectures produced here. Concepts such 'turbo-architecture', coined by Kai Vöckler in order to analyze post-1989 architecture in the Balkans (and mainly in the regions of the former Yugoslavia),¹³ or 'Capitalist Realism', used by Goldhoorn and Meuser to describe the recent examples in post-soviet Russia,¹⁴ are perfect examples of exploiting the peculiarities of the former communist bloc. As a matter of fact, the enthrallment for Socialist Realism, which opened the interest of Eastern Europe in the post-1989 historiography,¹⁵ is not unrelated to backing extraordinariness as a quest for significance.

Even the ordinariness commonly associated with the architectural production of the communist bloc is sometimes read as being extraordinary. Socialist modernism might look dreary, but its image in the last years has been interpreted as concealing a tragic rift: visual artists along with architectural historians presented it as an unfinished project, one about failed promises, one which is itself about to vanish.¹⁶ Contemplating the architectures of those years seems to intimate a set of reflections that question not only the political project in its complexity, but also the principles of modernism as an architectural project. Suddenly, the architecture behind the Iron Curtain reveals itself as exemplary for a reality larger than that of the communist bloc itself.

If contextualization might serve as a tactical approach, it surely constitutes a valuable methodological tool as well. Recent architectural



Nikola Nikolov, Veliko Turnovo hotel,
Veliko Turnovo (1967). Photo Carmen Popescu, 2007

Nikola Nikolov, Veliko Turnovo hotel,
Veliko Turnovo (1967): detail. Photo Carmen Popescu, 2007

historiography benefited immensely from its approaches, which helped in the forging of new methodologies. Contextualization is an important means for reaching another type of understanding of the object of our discipline. And as a matter of fact, Eastern Europe, as a field of study, contributed significantly to refining new approaches in architectural history. Ordinarity for instance – as I have briefly discussed above – was already present as an object of study in the Western milieu before 1989, due to the openings operated by sociologists and anthropologists like Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, but subsequently gained a new importance thanks to Eastern European topics. Mass-housing, as a paragon of ordinarity, stimulated an array of readings, from dealing with the problems raised by “XXL architecture” (including urban inventories) to assessing the ideals associated with it.¹⁷ Politics, sociology and anthropology, matters of transfers – these are concrete examples of such methodologies developed through studying Eastern Europe. Let me cite only two such approaches which contributed to expand the field of thinking in our discipline: David Crowley’s political and anthropological interest in the communist bloc¹⁸ and Ákos Moravánszky’s research on transfers from the Second to the Third World, a topic which is now continued and extended by Lukasz Stanek.¹⁹

I think that the architecture of the Eastern Europe, and implicitly its historiography, could still contribute to refining the tools and methodologies of our discipline. Instead of conclusions, I would say rather that our task is how to define these tools in order not only to speak about meaningful architecture – that is, an architecture provided with sense, because otherwise the interest in it would make no sense – but to speak meaningfully about architecture.

¹ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, 1994.

² Anthony Alofsin, *When Buildings Speak. Architecture as Language in the Habsburg Empire and Its Aftermath, 1867-1933*, University of Chicago Press, 1900.

³ “My purpose here is to outline a method of historical and critical analysis” – Alofsin, *op. cit.*, 12.

⁴ Among the many references of these two authors, I will quote here only the following two: Ákos Moravánszky, *Competing Visions. Aesthetic Invention and Social Imagination in Central European Architecture 1867-1918*, MIT Press, 1998; Friedrich Achleitner, *Region, ein Konstrukt? Regionismus, eine Pleite?*, Birkhäuser Verlag, 1997.

⁵ Alofsin, *op. cit.*, 8.

⁶ Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture 1750-1950*, Faber and Faber Ltd, 1965.

⁷ See Bruno Zevi, *Saper vedere l'architettura: saggio sull'interpretazione spaziale dell'architettura*, Einaudi, 1951.

⁸ Henrieta Moravčíková, “Monumentality in Slovak Architecture of the 1960s and 1970s: authoritarian, national, great and abstract” in *Journal of Architecture*, special issue “Behind the Iron Curtain: architecture in the former communist bloc, between isolation and fascination”, guest-edited by Carmen Popescu, no. 14/1, 2009, pp. 45-66.

⁹ See our articles, “Un patrimoine de l'identité: l'architecture à l'écoute des nationalismes”, in *Etudes balkaniques*, special issue “Architectural Heritage in the Balkans”, no. 12, 2005, pp. 135-172; “Maisons de la culture en Roumanie socialiste: une architecture de représentation”, in Richard Klein, Bernard Toullet (eds.), *Architecture de la culture. Relais du pouvoir européen*, Paris: Docomomo International, 2007, pp. 46-54.

¹⁰ Porumbescu, N. and Vaida-Porumbescu, M., “Specificul în arhitectură”, in *Arhitectură*, no. 2, 1967, pp. 12-17.

¹¹ See Nikolai Vukov, Luca Ponchiroli, *Communism of Stone: Monuments in Bulgaria, 1944-1989. An Album*. Ponchiroli editori, Mantova, 2012.

¹² See the article published at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/gallery/skopje-2014> (accessed on April 25 2013), which gives a series of links for this project.

¹³ Kai Vöckler, *Prishtina is Everywhere: turbourbanism: the aftermath of a crisis*, Archis, 2008. See also, Kai Vöckler (ed.), *Balkanology*, special issue of *Swiss Architecture Museum*, no. 06, 2008.

¹⁴ Bart Goldhoorn and Philipp Meuser, *Capitalist Realism. New Architecture in Russia*, Dom Publishers, 2006.

¹⁵ As a matter of fact, the interest in Socialist Realism preceded the fall of the Wall, as shows Anders Åman’s study, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe during the Stalin Era. An Aspect of Cold War History* (The Architectural History Foundation/MIT Press, 1992), which was first published in 1987 in Swedish (Carlsson Bokförlag).

¹⁶ See the research project and the series of exhibitions with the same name, *Unfinished Modernizations. Between Utopia and Pragmatism*, curated by Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić. In relation to this, see also Vladimir Kulić, Maroje Mrduljaš and Wolfgang Thaler, *Modernism In-Between. The Mediator Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia*, Jovis, 2012. There are several articles, publications and exhibitions which constituted in the past years a field of ‘ruinophilia’ of communist architectures, exploring their moral and physical decline after 1989. See, among others, Richard Pare (with an essay by Jean-Louis Cohen), *The Lost Vanguard. Russian Modernist Architecture 1922-1932*, Monacelli Press, 2007; Armin Linke and Srđan Jovanovic Weiss, *Socialist Architecture: The Vanishing Act*, Ringer, 2012.

¹⁷ See, among others, Mart Kalm and Ingrid Ruudi (eds.), *Constructed Happiness. Domestic Environment in the Cold War Era*, Estonian Academy of Arts, 2005; Kimberly Elman Zarecor, *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945-1960*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011; Henrieta Moravčíková et al., *Bratislava Atlas of Mass Housing. Welcome to Prefab Story!*, Slovart, 2011.

¹⁸ See Susan E. Reid and David Crowley (eds.), *Style and Socialism. Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, Berg, 2000; David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (eds.), *Socialist Spaces. Sites of Every day Life in the Eastern Bloc*, Berg, 2002; David Crowley and Jane Pavitt (eds.), *Cold War Modern Design 1945 – 1975*, V&A Publishing, 2008.

¹⁹ See “Export Architecture and Urbanism from Socialist Poland”, special issue of *Piktogram*, no. 15, 2010-2011, guest edited by Lukasz Stanek.