

## **Re-Centring the City. Global Mutations of Socialist Modernity (2020)**

Editors: Jonathan Bach and Michał Murawski

London: UCL Press

Language: English

*Re-Centring the City. Global Mutations of Socialist Modernity* features a collection of essays which provide a critical assessment of architectural symbolism by advancing the concept of centrality as a more reasonable and systematic tool in rethinking socialist heritage, rather than favouring theoretical generalisations that would otherwise bring about empirical inaccuracies.

The conceptual framework of the volume develops around the notions of urbanism and modern power shifts, occasionally reminding one of Victor Buchli's anthropological analysis addressing the political implications and social value of materiality of build form (*An Archaeology of Socialism, An Anthropology of Architecture*), of Svetlana Boym's poignant review of architectural embodiment of Soviet ideologies (*Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*) or of David Crowley's reflections on the transition undergone by Warsaw from spatial reshaping under socialism to regaining architectural taste (*Warsaw*). Although the interdependency of space and hegemony in eastern Europe has been previously looked at by researchers from various fields, *Re-Centring the City* displays greater ambitions by interweaving modalities of dealing with historical legacies seen as potential containers of memory within the ever-changing undercurrents of centre-periphery repositioning processes.

The six chapters of the collection exhibit a spiral development beginning with debates around the centrality of Moscow, followed by a peripheral expansion towards other contextually

relevant regions, further continuing with syntagmatic and paradigmatic outlooks on architectural (de)construction as mirroring the socio-political status quo.

This eclectic compilation of discourses opens with a provocative merge between Vladimir Paperny's personal account of Moscow's architecturally reinforced centrality by a firm representation of borders (p. 26) and Clementine Cecil's additional notes on the infrastructural challenges triggered by the centre-periphery reconfiguration of the Kremlin eventually conveying an 'apparent stability hiding instability' (p.42). Additionally, Andreas Schönle highlights the ambiguity of Moscow's statist rhetoric between totalitarianism and post-socialism, between rejection and re-enactment while Owen Hatherley and Daria Paramonova provide readers with an invitation to a present and future quest for spatial identity. With respect to peripheries, one prominent aspect seems to revolve around the dialectical nature of perceiving space through the prism of social (re)organisation, as many buildings "have come to both structure and suture the socialist and post-socialist eras and the accompanying division of the city into East and West" (p.79). Moreover, the time and space axis shape the contradictory centrality stemming from the current functionality of some architectural legacies (p.105).

One interesting section of the volume covers the idea of "a centrality within centrality," as churches have also been seen as spiritual and architectural alternatives to the rather tedious spatial similarity maintained by the socialist organisation and planning within Europe. "On the other hand, the churches were not bound by the limitations of the building industry. Architects were lured to these projects by the promise of unlimited artistic freedom," (p.124) state Kuba Snopek with Izabela Cichońska and Karolina Popera in their plea for the existence of a comforting architectural parallelism in Poland. However, a geographical expansion of these ideas would have also provided an interesting insight into the architectural syntax of other former

communist countries. In this respect, in Romania, the construction of the People's Salvation Cathedral, allegedly the biggest orthodox church in the world, drew national and international criticism for its pharaonic appearance.

The need for a balanced grasp of vertical or horizontal architecture would address the disproportionate urban regeneration between memory and uncertainty in dealing with cultural heritage or with the oscillation between atheism and peculiar leaps of faith displayed in peripheral spaces. Therefore, the role of both mosques and skyscrapers constitutes another relevant topic in examining the structural morphology of transitional mutations, as the former became objects of debate in point of their centrality or marginality (p.150), while the latter have fostered a cultural verticality perceived as a socio-political mark of prosperity (p.179).

The closing chapters not only tackle the interplay between rural and urban areas in negotiating centrality, but also social reactions to potential destabilising factors or the effective outcome of centrality over time, within historically defined geopolitical hierarchies. Overall, the volume reflects a commendable attempt to reconsider global architecture and to emphasise the complex relationship between society, politics and aesthetics, therefore challenging the reader to constantly reassess history and all its cultural forms of spatial materialisation.

MIRUNA IACOB

*Transilvania University of Braşov*