

East German Architects and Planners in the Global South¹



Jakob Marcks

In recent years, a growing number of historians translated *New Cold War history* approaches to the field of architecture and urban planning. Most notably, Łukasz Stanek's groundbreaking *Architecture in Global Socialism* (2020) shows how global cooperation within and across the Cold War divide shaped urbanization.² Interestingly, Stanek overcomes the prevailing country-of-origin approach (studying the works of one Western or Eastern architect or architecture firm in the Global South) and instead uses six cities in Africa and the Middle East as starting points — from where he traces the complex networks that made these places. While East German architects do not feature prominently in Stanek's book, the past years saw a small yet increasing amount of research on East German architectural exchange with the Global South. Against this background, the essay at hand traces the most relevant books, chapters and articles of the past three years (2019–2021) that study the entanglements of East German architects in the Global South.

Three different types of studies can be identified: To begin with, Butter (2020) sketches a general overview of East German architectural engagement in the Global South from the 1950s through the 1980s, embedding these activities in the broader framework of international relations, economic policy and the East German solidarity agenda.³ The second type of research follows the life paths of individual architects working in the Global South. With an emphasis on interviews and personal accounts, Fenk et al. (2020) explore the contribution of Heinz Schwarzbach to the new Nigerian Capital city of Abuja⁴ and Motylińska and Phan (2019) trace the work and life of Ute

-
- 1 Research for this article has been supported by the Grant Agency of Charles University in Prague (GA UK) under project no. 314821.
 - 2 L. STANEK, *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War*, Oxford 2020.
 - 3 A. BUTTER, *Solidarität in Stein und Stahl? Der Architektorexport der DDR als Hebel einer 'antikolonialistischen' Außenpolitik*, in: H.P. BROGIATO, M. RÖSCHNER (eds.), *Koloniale Spuren in den Archiven der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft*, Halle (Saale) 2020.
 - 4 A-K. FENK — R. LEE — M. MOTYLIŃSKA, *Unlikely Collaborations? Planning Experts from Both Sides of the Iron Curtain and the Making of Abuja*, in: *Comparativ — Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2020, pp. 38–59.



and Peter Baumbach in Ethiopia.⁵ Finally, Schwenkel (2020) follows an ethnographic approach to understand how the Vietnamese city of Vinh has been rebuilt with East German support after US bombings and how it has been adapted and repurposed in the years that followed.⁶

FOUR DECADES OF EAST GERMAN ARCHITECTURE ABROAD

Butter's "*Solidarität in Stein und Stahl? Der Architektorexport der DDR als Hebel einer 'antikolonialistischen' Außenpolitik*" (2020) is mostly based on archival materials (published in a monograph about traces of colonialism in the different archives of the Leibniz Association) and secondary literature.⁷ Butter gives an overview of East German milestone projects in the Global South from the beginning to the end of the existence of the East German state. He provides an overarching — albeit short — profile of East German architectural collaboration with the Global South through these projects. Butter's observations include, firstly, the tension between solidarity and economic ambitions. The author exemplifies the idea of solidarity through an interview with Karlheinz Schlesier — a renowned East-German architect who also worked in Vinh, Vietnam (see the review of Christina Schwenkel's book below). Schlesier claimed that there were no architectural exports, as the socialist nature of their projects always formed an act of empowerment. On the other hand, economic benefits were indeed an essential aspect of East German architectural collaboration with the Global South — especially in later projects. Secondly, Butter elaborates on the learning curve of East German architects. As they could not build on colonial networks and expertise (unlike many of their Western competitors), working in the Global South was a process of learning. This included technical learnings — e.g. how to adjust building technologies to different climatic conditions or make use of local raw materials — and cultural ones, which often resulted in clashing expectations between them and their counterparts from the Global South. Thirdly, Butter assesses continuities (mostly structural ones linked to socialist economies) and changes over time. While the early years were characterized by big, politically motivated projects with a strong solidarity dimension (such as the reconstruction of Hamhung in North Korea in the 1950s, for which East Germany brought up one per cent of its GDP), in later projects, the economic side was much stronger. This shift can be explained by East Germany's economic history, but also through the rivalry with West Germany and (the abandoning of) Hallstein doctrine. For Butter, the construction of Abuja in the 1980s is a case in point (the case of Abuja has been analysed in more detail by Fenk et al., see below). In Abuja, the East German participation followed predominantly economic objectives and East German architects worked alongside their Western fellows.

5 M. MOTYLIŃSKA — P. PHAN, *Not the Usual Way? On the Involvement of an East German Couple with the Planning of the Ethiopian Capital*, in: *Architecture beyond Europe*, Vol. 2019, No. 16, 2019.

6 C. SCHWENKEL, *Building Socialism — The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam* Durham 2020.

7 BUTTER, *Solidarität in Stein und Stahl?*



Butter's 2020 contribution provides a good point of entry for those who want to acquaint with the topic yet remains on a relatively general level due to the limited scope (chapter in a book). For further insights, the author's previous work on this topic is highly recommended — such as an article about East Germany using the International Union of Architects (UIA) and other organizations as an international stage to showcase the achievements of East German architecture.⁸ Moreover, a research project that resulted in a database of more than 400 East German architecture projects in 60 countries (realized and unrealized) should be mentioned.⁹

THE INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE

Two recent articles follow the life trajectories of individual architects. In “*Unlikely Collaborations? Planning Experts from both Sides of the Iron Curtain and the Making of Abuja*”, Fenk et al. (2020) trace the work of Heinz Schwarzbach in Abuja, Nigeria.¹⁰ Devastated by the Civil War, the plans for a new Nigerian Capital — to be constructed in a region not dominated by any ethnic group — materialized from the late 1970s. As an oil-rich country, both Western and Eastern business interests focused on Nigeria. This also becomes evident in the development of Abuja, which turned into a place of global cooperation — spanning “at least six continents and 40 years”. From the East German perspective, Abuja falls into a period of change: limited by internal and external constraints, East German architecture played only a marginal role in international markets for most of the time. However, the 1980s saw a rapid increase in foreign acquisition activities, motivated by a growing need for hard currencies. Under these conditions, Heinz Schwarzbach was appointed Chief Architect and Planner of the Federal Capital Development Authority (FCDA). In Abuja, Schwarzbach led a predominantly Nigerian team and was in charge of coordinating the master plan development. Based on letters and interviews with Schwarzbach and planners from the other side of the Iron Curtain who were involved in Abuja, Fenk et al. show how fears and insecurities characterized their collaboration in the beginning (“*Should I really be talking to him?*”) — but also how they soon developed regular cooperation. On the one hand, the authors describe Abuja as a place of *unlikely collaboration*. On the other hand, they show how the narratives of the involved persons remain disparate until today — be it a British planner accusing the East Germans of a lack of readiness and international experience, or be it differing perceptions of the role of West Germany in the project.

8 A. BUTTER, *Showcase and Window to the World: East German Architecture Abroad 1949–1990*, in: *Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2018, pp. 249–269.

9 The research project was titled “*GDR Architecture Abroad. Projects, Actors and Cultural Transfer Processes*“, duration: 2016–2018, Principal Investigators: C. BERNHARDT, A. BUTTER, funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, URL: <https://leibniz-irs.de/en/research/projects/project/architekturprojekte-der-ddr-im-ausland-bautenakteure-und-kulturelle-transferprozesse/>, accessed 21 August 2019.

10 FENK — LEE — MOTYLIŃSKA, *Unlikely Collaborations? Planning Experts from Both Sides of the Iron Curtain and the Making of Abuja*.



Motylińska and Phan (2019) follow a similar approach in “*Not the usual way? On the involvement of an East German couple with the planning of the Ethiopian Capital*”.¹¹ With an oral history approach, the authors try to deconstruct how Peter and Ute Baumbach spent three and a half years in Addis Ababa on teaching and planning projects in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Unlike Heinz Schwarzbach, the Baumbachs did not have one defined assignment but worked on various projects, as they were sent abroad through an academic exchange programme. Next to a thorough assessment of the actual work of the Baumbachs, the authors describe how the couple understood and negotiated the various expectations linked to their stay in Addis Ababa. This includes, for example, tensions between the Baumbachs’ anthropological approach to urban planning and the modernist vision of the local city administration. Another essential aspect discussed in the article is their relation to the regime in Berlin. While the Baumbachs were representatives of a socialist country, they understood themselves as “*creative partners of the Ethiopians rather than as agents of a socialist regime*”. While acknowledging that oral history-based accounts of the past require caution, the authors draw a picture of the Baumbachs in Addis Ababa as an independent couple that was not integrated into the expat (and East German) community in the city. They were neither overtly loyal to the regime nor explicitly fleeing from the conditions at home; the Baumbachs were likely “*motivated by a chance to work and live in a different environment that confronted them with new challenges within different historical and societal contexts*”. Finally, Motylińska and Phan discuss the respective roles of Peter and Ute in their professional cooperation, drawing a comparison to the British architect couple Edwin Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew — a comparison that remained tentative, though, and unconfirmed by the Baumbachs.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

With “*Building Socialism — the Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam*”, Schwenkel (2020) delivers unique ethnographic insights into the city of Vinh.¹² After the US bombings, Vinh was designed as a model city for the socialist reconstruction of Vietnam in the 1970s. Following a detailed description of the city’s destruction, Schwenkel describes the reconstruction plans and how the Quang Trung neighbourhood transformed until today — a neighbourhood that has been rebuilt with the support of East German experts and financial means, and where Schwenkel lived for several months. Through the example of Vinh, Schwenkel tries to understand how urban space in former socialist places transformed after the end of socialism, emphasising the perceptions and actions of the local population. The book is based on interviews and participatory observation. With her focus on the acceptance and appropriation of architecture by its users, Schwenkel explores a topic that remains neglected by most other Cold War studies on architectural circulations (or “translations”, as

11 MOTYLIŃSKA — PHAN, *Not the Usual Way? On the Involvement of an East German Couple with the Planning of the Ethiopian Capital*.

12 SCHWENKEL, *Building Socialism — The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam*.

Schwenkel calls it with reference to Esra Akcan).¹³ The book traces the history of Vinh from a double perspective, including both Vietnamese and East German experiences. For instance, the author explores how the project was promoted in East Germany and how East German authorities framed it as “Vietnam’s Dresden”, how East German architectural knowledge has been translated to the Vietnamese context, but also its impact on the perception of East Germany in Vinh today.



CONCLUSIONS

East German entanglements in the Global South have been researched by several scholars in the past years,¹⁴ yet architectural cooperation remains an under-researched sub-theme. The four publications presented above show the richness of available sources and topics. They reveal specific research trends and point at aspects worth being studied further.

Firstly, the individual or personal experience of East-South circulations features prominently in several of the most recent publications. This includes Schwenkel’s ethnographic approach, the oral history study of the Baumbachs by Motylińska and Phan, or the analysis of letters from Abuja and interviews by Fenk et al.. In this context, an older work by Sin (2018) should also be mentioned. Sin’s dissertation assesses the construction of Hungnam and Hamhung in North Korea and East Germany’s role in these works, building upon interviews with a contemporary witness.^{15, 16} Motylińska and Phan elaborate extensively on the limitations that come with research based on personal accounts (e.g. biases). At the same time, their study — like the other ones mentioned above — also exemplifies the relevance of going beyond traditional archival resources to explore new perspectives.

Secondly, both Schwenkel and Motylińska and Phan point explicitly at the role of women. The historiography of architecture and urban planning circulations in the Global Cold War is dominated by narratives of white men from the US and Western

13 The term “translation” should underline how knowledge has been transformed in the process of circulating; Schwenkel refers to E. AKCAN, *Architecture in Translation: Germany, Turkey and the Modern House*, Durham 2012.

14 Among the first scholars targeting this topic was Ulrich van der Heyden (e.g. U. VAN DER HEYDEN, *GDR Development Policy in Africa: Doctrine and Strategies between Illusions and Reality 1960–1990. The Example (South) Africa*, Münster 2013). The most recent publications include E. BURTON et al. (eds.), *Navigating Socialist Encounters: Moorings and (Dis)Entanglements between Africa and East Germany during the Cold War*, Oldenbourg 2021; as well as E. BURTON, *In Diensten Des Afrikanischen Sozialismus — Tansania und die globale Entwicklungsarbeit der beiden deutschen Staaten, 1961–1990*, Oldenbourg 2021.

15 D. S. SIN, *Die Planung des Wiederaufbaus der Städte Hamhung und Hungnam in Nordkorea durch die DAG-Städtebaubrigade der DDR von 1955 — 1962 — Eine städtebaugeschichtliche Abhandlung aus der Sicht eines Zeitzeugen*, Diss., Hamburg 2017.

16 East Germany’s contribution to Hamhung has also been studied by Y-S. HONG, *Through a Glass Darkly: East German Assistance to North Korea and Alternative Narratives of the Cold War*, in: *Comrades of Color — East Germany in the Cold War World*, New York 2015, pp. 43–72.



Europe (and more recently also the socialist bloc). Approaches like Stanek's one — starting with specific places and then disentangling the networks that formed these places¹⁷ — may help unveil the roles and contributions of local stakeholders from the Global South and thus overcome such “Northern” perspectives. Still, the role of women remains almost entirely unexplored — they were less visible partially due to lower presence, but partially also due to standing “in the second row”, as Motylińska and Phan explain. Gender questions are also discussed in Schwenkel's book to a certain extent — for example regarding the reconstruction (female labour played a significant role in the actual construction of Quang Trung) and the living conditions in the neighbourhood. Ethnographic methods (Schwenkel) and Oral History (Motylińska and Phan) seem reasonable research instruments that may help to overcome existing biases. Traditional archival sources rather perpetuate such biases as far as official documents are concerned. Such documents usually include references to leading figures (usually men) but rarely mention contributors (more often also women).

Thirdly, the topic of multilateralism requires further attention. Fenk et al. show how Abuja became a place for global cooperation across the Cold War divide, and a previous publication of Butter details how East Germany availed itself of UIA as a “window to the world”.¹⁸ No further publications on East German multilateral architectural cooperation are known, yet a few ongoing research projects touch upon multilateralism. Whether cooperation through UN agencies and organisations like HABITAT and UNESCO, or multilateral cooperation on other grounds: going beyond bilateral cooperation may help extend hitherto insights that are mostly based on donor-recipient relations and instead focus on actual forms of cooperation and coordination.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ł. STANEK, *Socialist Worldmaking: Architecture and Global Urbanization in the Cold War*, in: J. MARK — A. KALINOVSKY — S. MARUNG (eds.), *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World*, Bloomington 2020, pp. 166–188.

¹⁸ BUTTER, *Showcase and Window to the World: East German Architecture Abroad 1949–1990*.

¹⁹ An interesting first approach to multilateralism in post-WWII global architecture cooperation was the session “Multilateralism since 1945: From the Comecon to the Belt and Road Initiative” at the European Architectural History Network 2021 conference chaired by Łukasz Stanek (2–5 June 2021), <https://eahn2021.eca.ed.ac.uk/programme/sessions/>, see Session 28.