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V. Molnár Building the State: Architecture, Politics,  
and State Formation in Post-War Central Europe.  
2013 Routledge 210 pp. £70.00 (hardback)

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**Abstract**

Postwar architecture in Communist Europe has a reputation for ugliness, shoddy construction, and, through its very existence, complicity with the regimes. Scholars of the built environment have been slow to initiate research on the topic because of judgments about the quality of the architecture itself, as well as an aversion to the politically charged discourse around it. In this ambitious and multidisciplinary book, sociologist Virág Molnár works against these perceptions and decisively argues that our understanding of Communism in Europe must include an analysis of the ‘transformation of the built environment,’ since this transformation ‘was politically mobilized in the service of social change, first in socialist modernization and then in the post-socialist transition’ (p. 3).

**Disciplines**

Architectural History and Criticism

**Comments**

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*Book Review*

V. Molnár, **Building the State: Architecture, Politics, and State Formation in Post-War Central Europe**. Routledge 2013 210 pp. £70.00 (hardback)

Kimberly Elman Zarecor, *Iowa State University*

Post-war architecture in Communist Europe has a reputation for ugliness, shoddy construction, and, through its very existence, complicity with the regimes. Scholars of the built environment have been slow to initiate research on the topic because of judgements about the quality of the architecture itself, as well as an aversion to the politically charged discourse around it. In this ambitious and multidisciplinary book, sociologist Virág Molnár works against these perceptions and decisively argues that our understanding of Communism in Europe must include an analysis of the "transformation of the built environment," since this transformation "was politically mobilized in the service of social change, first in socialist modernization and then in the postsocialist transition." (p. 3)

The book, compact at only 210 pages, is organized into six chapters: an introduction, four case studies from either East Germany or Hungary that are arranged chronically, and a conclusion. The strong introductory first chapter binds the narrative together by situating architecture methodologically as a useful and wide-ranging field of inquiry that can inform global studies of state formation, the politics of design, and theories of expert knowledge. Chapters two and five consider Berlin before the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and after the end of Communism in the 1990s. Chapters three and four are about Hungarian developments—the introduction of industrialized housing in the 1960s and the debates that emerged in the 1970s about its aesthetics. Molnár creates coherence across the case studies by following the "oscillation between modernity and tradition" that was a dominant and shared trope in the region throughout the period. (p. 25)

Chapter two chronicles the importation of the Soviet paradigm of Socialist Realism to East Germany in the context of postwar reconstruction and the tensions around the architectural legacies of the Weimar and Nazi periods. Molnár pays close attention to professional debates, new institutional structures, and the vocabulary that architects and urban planners used to describe socialist realism and

its material culture including the iconic *Stalinallee* project. Chapter three moves east to Hungary where intense discussions occurred in the 1960s around the question of the ideal socialist home. The widespread phenomenon of "self-help" house construction, in which families built their own houses over several years with little guidance from professionals, was in competition with an internationalist vision of modern industrial production of mass housing promoted by state housing policy and architects. (p. 86) Despite the objections of experts, self-help building led Hungary to have by far the largest percentage of housing units in single-family homes in Communist Europe, which she attributes in part to a failure of state control.

Chapter four shows that as industrialized housing production and state control increased in Hungary into the 1970s, the formal qualities of the buildings came under scrutiny. The so-called Tulip Debate emerged in the press when young architects designed a housing estate with abstract tulip decorations on prefabricated façade panels and an older generation of modernists strenuously rejected this as useless ornamentation. Through careful analysis of the debate points, Molnár situates the conflict within a long-standing urbanist-populist discourse in Hungary with the urbanists defending a Western European development model and the populists who supported Hungarian uniqueness.

The case study in chapter five jumps forward in time to the late 1990s and shifts location back to Berlin where the newly-unified city was struggling with its postsocialist reconstruction program. Molnár once again returns to the binary between tradition and modernity through the debates around the idea of a "traditional 'European city'," which took hold among an elite group of Berlin architects and planners who wanted to return the city to an idealized version of its nineteenth-century form in a process called "critical reconstruction." (pp. 136, 146) She maps a network of local architects who were instrumental in institutionalizing this preference and shows why architects who wanted to bring global architectural paradigms to sites in Berlin often failed.

Molnár's unorthodox approach to the organization of her material and its interdisciplinary nature does open the door to criticism in some areas. Since there is no chronological overlap and little comparative analysis across chapters, the aggregate strength of the examples is diminished and the book reads more like four articles than linked chapters even with the strong introduction. The unique aspects of the East German case are also underemphasized; no other country in the region had such

complicated interpersonal, political, and physical histories, so it is difficult to extrapolate to other contexts from this vantage point. There is also the difficulty of truly interdisciplinary research. This is a sociological study of architectural production by a sociologist; therefore its engagement with sociological methods and debates is evident. The weaker component is the architectural research. In parts of the study, she relies heavily on individual authors who have written about architecture in Hungary and East Germany, but a broader bibliography on post-war architecture is not highly developed. As one example, the role of international postmodernism in the design of the tulip panels deserves additional analysis. Overall, this book succeeds in bringing the built environment into the foreground of studies of state formation and expert knowledge production. It should enjoy a wide readership among scholars from sociology, built environment studies, and Central European studies.