

The Heritage of Postwar Modernism: Engaged Research

Dedičstvo povojnového modernizmu: Angažovaný výskum

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When the media announcement appeared in 2019 of the plans by the new owner of the former Trade Unions House in Bratislava to demolish this iconic work of postwar modernity, this news spurred us to start work to save it. We were aware that without this achievement, the exceptional legacy of Slovakia's late 20th-century modern heritage would be incomplete. Since this time, we experienced a period in which we, as academic researchers, were compelled to take part in – not always pleasant – public and political discussions. Simultaneously, though, this experience formed a time of intensive investigations and work towards understanding the architecture and history of this exceptional built achievement. At the end of 2021, though, the developer received a demolition permit and soon the heavy machinery will be digging into a part of irreplaceable architectural heritage.

Destruction of the built heritage of the past led to the implementation of legislation to protect this heritage,¹ from which there emerged a specific discipline of expertise in public administration – heritage protection. In turn, it is directly dependent on the work of architectural historians, who identify the architectonic, spatial, technical, or social values of specific layers of architectural heritage. And their research then becomes a tool for the immediate political decisions towards legislative protection. The ideal succession of processes in heritage protection, however – from the discovery of the work by scholars, its preparation by a specific public body, up to its approval by elected officials and acceptance by the public – does not work in many cases. Demolition or harmful rebuilding often becomes the point where scholarly findings are transformed into an implement of mobilisation for public objections and pressure to adjust the legislation or implement political changes.

The direct involvement of scholars in the struggle to protect architectural heritage is generally regarded as an abandonment of scientific objectivity and involvement in a space pejoratively termed “activism”. Such a strict division of the work of architectural historians between a public sphere of impartial data publication and private engagement brings up underlying questions of the purpose and ethics of research itself. Should historians remain merely the chroniclers of destruction, to evoke the powerful image of Walter Benjamin's melancholy Angel of History?² Or is, in fact, every scholarly interpretation itself a mental exit from the ivory tower of objectivity while indifferent observation of destruction remains mere nihilism, against the unquestionable need for science to help the world and society become better? With this in mind, could it not become

possible to regard the engaged participation of researchers in heritage protection as a legitimate scholarly approach?

In the current era of climate change, a similar ethical dilemma is confronting the research work of natural scientists. The phenomenon of “environmental grief” among scientists is now sufficiently mapped within psychology.³ Impartiality and emotional restraint, long seen as vital attributes of scientific objectivity, have damaging effects on the psychic health of scientists investigating dying biotopes.⁴ Yet the engaged publication of scientific findings and observations should not merely be confined to the idea of therapy towards overcoming personal loss.⁵

In the social sciences, where the loss of an investigative subject could directly imply the loss of human life, the first attempts have appeared at integrating social engagement into research methods. Jenn M. Jackson, Brian Shoup, and H. Howell Williams state that the contribution of “civically engaged research” in the examination of socially marginalised groups is valuable not only for deeper understanding of the research subjects themselves.⁶ Through the use of the research findings towards the achievement of the social and political goals of such groups, there can also appear chances to investigate the reactions of majorities, the emancipatory efforts of minorities, and by extension gain a better understanding of society as a wider entity.

Postwar Modernism is, in a sense, itself a marginalised category in European architecture. The public has yet to reach a broad awareness of these relatively new structures as historical landmarks, while even the interest of the European heritage community is far from balanced. A clear indication is offered by the statistics for heritage-protected buildings, where the number in post-socialist Europe is significantly lower than in many countries of the West. Yet if we consider the current practice of destruction of this layer of heritage, the classical Cold War division of West and East is no longer so sharp, with instances of the loss of major works of postwar modernism found in both halves of the continent, or indeed across the world.⁷

The current mono-thematic issue of *Architektúra & urbanizmus* edited by Henrieta Moravčíková, Peter Szalay and Rostislav Švácha, present soundings into the destruction and rejection of postwar modern architecture across a wide geographic span, from Belgium into Central Europe. The varied causes and narratives of the problematic acceptance of late 20th-century architectural heritage presented in the contributions might seem to indicate the persistence of a West-East division primarily through the function of the buildings under threat. The two Western teams – the Belgian researchers Nadin Augustiniok,

Marie Moors, Bie Plevoets and Koenraad Van Cleempoel investigating the Antwerp social housing complex Arenawijk, and the German scholars Maren Harnack, Ruth Schlögl, Matthias Brunner, and Natalie Heger addressing mass housing in the Rhein – Main region around Frankfurt – both stress the impact on mass and social housing, or more broadly the built legacy of the social policies of the Western welfare state.

In the texts from post-socialist Europe, by contrast, the predominant theme is of threats to public infrastructure. An extensive portfolio of iconic public buildings in Poland is addressed in the text by the Polish architectural historian Tomasz Zemkiewicz. Czech industrial buildings are examined in the study by Lenka Popelová and Tomáš Šenberger. The Hungarian scholar Domonkos Wettstein focuses on the previously little-explored question of landscape architecture. Several contributions address the fates of individual structures in Slovakia. The history and the state at the time of writing of the Trade Unions House is recalled by the study of Henrieta Moravčíková and Peter Szalay. Questions raised by the reconstruction of the Košice department store Prior, in turn, are analysed by Monika Kicová, Peter Beňo and Nikola Schnitzerová. All these studies reveal that in the countries that experienced post-socialist transformation, the most immediately threatened architectural heritage consists of works representing investments in socialist public infrastructure: in a sense confirming the assumption of a persistent anti-Communist animus in Europe's East and a contrasting continuity of the public sphere in the capitalist West.

Still, a detailed comparison of the actual processes leading to the disappearance of postwar architecture across Europe reveals that the strict dichotomy offered by this image should not be taken as a uniform truth. As indicated by Ákos Moravánszky, efforts toward the humanisation of architecture and policies to reduce social inequality were similar, in the early years of postwar Modernism, in both the socialist bloc and the West.⁸ Currently, with the prevailing political tendencies across Europe favouring neoliberal capitalism marked by the central idea of a minimal state and unregulated market growth, there is a common effort to use architecture in the race for the

greatest economic value-extraction from the built environment. Whether it is a question of the privatisation of social and public housing funds and its associated infrastructure in the West, or the privatisation of the grandiosely sized socialist public works in the East, the gaining of profits from real estate is in no way limited either by social and public function, or by architectonic and urban form.

Moreover, just as the actual practice of demolition may seem identical in West and East, the current wave is linked to a previous one prevalent in the postwar era. Modernist designers and planners argued for demolition of historical architecture in humanistic terms, stressing the sanitary renewal of “sick” neighbourhoods and the imperative of innovation and progress.⁹ Today's demolition, grounded in the imperative of economic growth, argues in favour of continual modernisation and the inefficiency of postwar modernity, linked to the ineffectiveness of the social state.¹⁰ No less, the current process could equally be interpreted in the spirit of “creative destruction” voiced by economist Joseph Schumpeter, a process that through the cyclical destroying of extant values brings forth possibilities for further economic growth. Destruction of architectural heritage is itself part of the broader paradigm of unlimited economic growth out of necessity “emerging from the ruins”, as aptly noted with regard to the urban environment by Marshal Berman.¹¹

As a method for the scholarly analysis of postwar modernist architecture, engaged research need not remain solely a reflection and understanding of the destruction of this part of heritage. Several of the studies published in the current issue indicate positive trends and success stories for the direct involvement of scholars in the process of its rescue. Such examples could include collaboration with the public in averting destructive intentions, as shown in the text on the saving of Prior in Košice, the creation of public policy as in the question of Czech industrial heritage, on work within the public like the campaign for the modernist housing estates in and around Frankfurt, or the community renewal of threatened spaces like the pedestrian terraces in Bratislava's Petržalka.

1 SAX, Joseph L., 1990. Heritage Preservation as a Public Duty: The Abbé Grégoire and the Origins of an Idea. *Michigan Law Review*. **88**(5), pp. 1142 – 1169.

2 BENJAMIN, Walter, 1940. *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. In: *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, (3. Edition 1969, tr. by Harry Zohn).

3 CUNSOLO, Ashlee and LANDMANN, Karen E., 2017. *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*. Montreal: McGill – Queen's University Press, 365 pp.

4 CUNSOLO, Ashlee and NEVILLE, Elis R., 2018. Ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change-related loss. *Nature Climate*

Change. **8**(8), pp. 275 – 281. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-018-0092-2>

5 VINCE, Gaia, 2020. How scientists are coping with 'ecological grief', *Guardian.com* [online] 12. 1. 2020 [Accessed 16. 12. 2021]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2020/jan/12/how-scientists-are-coping-with-environmental-grief>

6 JACKSON, Jenn M., SHOUP, Brian and WILLIAMS, H. Howell, 2021. Why Civically Engaged Research? Understanding and Unpacking Researcher Motivations. *PS. Political Science and Politics*. **54**(4), pp. 721 – 724.

7 Examples could be the continually updated listing prepared by the inter-

national organisation DOCOMOMO – Heritage in Danger. Available at: <https://www.docomomo.com/category/heritage>, or for a specific focus on postwar Modernist works, the project #SOSBRUTALISM. Available at: <https://www.sosbrutalism.org/cms/15802395>

8 MORAVÁNSZKY, Ákos. 2017. Re-Humanizing Architecture: The search for the Common Ground in the Postwar Years, 1950 – 1970. In: Moravánszky, Á. and Hopfengärtner, J. (eds.). *Re-Humanizing Architecture, New Forms of Community, 1950 – 1970*. Basel: Birkhäuser, pp. 23 – 41

9 PAPERNY, Vladimir, 2006. Modernism and Destruction in Architecture. *Art Margins online* [online] 5. 6. 2006 [Accessed 16. 12. 2021].

Available at: <https://artmargins.com/modernism-and-destruction-in-architecture/>

10 OTERO-PAILOS, Jorge, 2014. Supplement to OMA's Preservation Manifesto. In: Koolhaas, R. and Otero-Pailos, J. (eds.). *Preservation si overtaking us*. New York: GSAPP BOOKS. [online] 2014 [Accessed 16. 12. 2021]. Available at: <https://www.arch.columbia.edu/books/reader/6-preservation-is-overtaking-us#reader-anchor-4>

11 BERMAN, Marshal, 2014. Emerging from the Ruins. *Dissent*. **66**(1), pp. 59 – 66.