

Lisa B.W. Drummond and Douglas Young (eds), *Socialist and Post-Socialist Urbanisms: Critical Reflections from a Global Perspective*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781442632530 (paper); ISBN: 9781442632837 (cloth); ISBN: 9781442632844 (ebook)

The key word that captures the main contribution of this book to the extensive and ongoing debates on socialist urbanism is certainly the “global” in the subtitle. The worldwide dissemination of socialist urban practices seems obvious: this was the major ambition and the very core of socialist urban experiment. However, one should accept the fact that in the popular imagination everything that concerns “socialist”, “radical”, and “utopian” has become first and foremost associated with the “East”. Unprecedented and large-scale mass housing projects in the Soviet Union, shades of communism in post-socialist Eastern Europe, or socialist influence on urban planning in Asia – these are probably the basic elements that still continue to shape the image of “socialist urbanism” in the public mind. The main feature of this image is that it has quite clear geographical boundaries, which extend somewhere in the area “to the east of Berlin and to the north of the 40th parallel” (Ferenčuhová and Gentile 2016: 485).

In this sense, the mere fact of putting together such cases as Stockholm, Leningrad, Addis Ababa, and Managua indeed makes a strong impression. And this is not just about broadening the scope of research or enriching empirical data. Such a view is seriously contributing to a shift in perception of the urban socialism phenomenon itself. When a study on urban socialist legacy includes, aside from the quite expected cases from Eastern Europe, analyses of how socialist pasts affect urban socio-natures in Nicaragua and a change of living conditions in the suburbs of Stockholm, it gives a new way of looking at the subject in general. Urban socialism proves to be global not only due to its worldwide expansion, but also to varied manifestations. It appears to be diverse, multifaceted, and finding itself in “a variety of forms and locales” (p.3). In this outlook, socialist urbanism no longer belongs to any kind of a “grey zone” in the “East”, but spreads across the whole world and enters many different areas.

This enables us to see a pretty obvious but often poorly articulated thing: socialist urban legacies are an integral and vital part of the modern world, without which it would look different. Furthermore, these legacies are still in effect and reveal their traces in various spheres,

sometimes the most unexpected ones. The authors' efforts to analyse those influences "from around the socialist world" (p. 3) is thus meaningful, timely, and promising. However, as is often the case, the book does more to raise the issue than to offer definitive answers. It might look as if the authors fall into a methodological trap, but perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they deliberately choose a hard road. A call to start thinking socialist urbanism "globally" requires a new theoretical framework, which, in turn, necessarily entails new analytical tools and categories. Obviously, such tools are still lacking today, as well as a language for describing a global socialist urbanism per se.

To date, all the main knowledge and understanding of how former socialist cities exist and transform has been accumulated and developed in a pretty clear framework – "post-socialism". Recently, this category has been subject to criticism as obsolete and inadequate to explain ongoing processes (see e.g. Gentile 2018; Hirt et al. 2016; Kinossian 2021; Müller 2019; Müller and Trubina 2020). The book's editors seem to share this scepticism, noting in particular that "what is substantively 'post-socialist' is a matter of some, though as yet surprisingly little, discussion" (p.11). Nevertheless, "post-socialism" remains a central category for the book, providing the conceptual outline for the most of contributions.

That actually should come as no surprise. The concept of post-socialism is obviously outdated, and in many cases its use becomes even embarrassing. Thus, for instance, the definition of "post-socialist" in relation to a modern-day Prague, Leipzig, or Moscow sounds today increasingly strange. But in spite of all that, this approach has one major advantage: it gives a clear framework, comprehensible language, and, most importantly, a sense of belonging to an academic tradition. Understandably, in the absence of clearly defined alternatives, it is rather difficult to put aside a well-tested tool.

The problem, however, is that a full and consistent review of socialism's global scope can hardly be possible in such a framework. A move beyond traditional geographical and temporal boundaries also means that usual understandings of socialism no longer work. If urban socialism includes all possible implementations of socialist ideas ever and wherever they existed, the very concept turns into an extremely vague or vanishing theoretical construction. The traces of socialist urban experiments can be found throughout the whole world, from Latin America to the

Middle East, and even in Australia (p.6). This opens up a promising prospect for analysis, but this analysis is not so much about post-socialism or what can be called “post-socialist legacies”, “lasting effects”, or “aftermaths”. All these “socialisms” are too different, and their outcomes too uncertain, being scattered across time and space. Evidently, the urban socialist experiences of the Soviet Union and Sweden are so distinct, due to all possible aspects of social and economic conditions, that perhaps the only thing they have in common is the word “socialism”. Does it mean that placing them into a single context makes no sense? If one follows the line of comparing their “post-socialist trajectories”, it seems to be so. The starting points of those experiments, ideology, ways of implementation, time periods, everything is completely different. However, this is, again, a view from the “post-socialist” perspective, which is, in fact, far from being “global”.

One of the major questions which arises after reading almost every chapter in the book might sound like this: to what extent are all these numerous traces and manifestations of urban socialism, which authors discern in various spheres of current urban development, linked to “socialist pasts” under current conditions? And is this linkage still significantly strong?

It seems that in many cases all those elements of “socialist urban practice” have been quite closely integrated into new realities, being driven by new urban dynamics and following new urban trends. They look less and less like remnants of a bygone socialist era and more like they found a new logic of development in changed circumstances.

Should we, for instance, consider the transformation of the socialist modernist district of Prague’s South City into an international office center as a sort of developing urban socialist idea in the new context, or more as an inclusion of those urban planning structures into a totally new system of urban development, in which they acquire distinctive characteristics and follow new logics (see p.113-128)? If it is the latter, then does that have anything to do with a “socialist past” and its lasting effect? Or does it make sense to view ongoing radical transformations of urban space in Phnom Penh or Addis Ababa as “post-socialist”, if these transformations are affected by a variety of processes and highly complicated dynamics, where elements of socialism are barely visible?

The point, of course, is not whether some socialist urban legacy is vanishing or not, or how it is vanishing. The main question is whether this legacy may still be considered as a “legacy” when it gains completely new functional and symbolic roles and becomes part of a new system. It actually seems that authors of the book are well aware of this contradiction. Explicitly or implicitly, most of them are trying to move beyond a “post-socialist” framework. Thus, Gabriel Fauveaud seeks to overcome too simplistic temporal visions of Phnom Penh’s development after the fall of the socialist system, and argues that “the transition from socialist to post-socialist cities is made of multiple time scales” (p.147). Steven Logan, while describing the intervention of new city development projects into the urban fabric of the socialist area of South City in Prague, remarks that these processes paradoxically “offer both continuation *and* rupture with socialist planning and architecture” (p.126). In turn, Laura Visan openly calls for thinking on the socialist architecture of Bucharest “outside the socialist/post-socialist paradigm” (p.180).

The need to change the focus on viewing socialist urbanism, thus, can be perceived as a sort of an implicit message of the book. What can be concluded from most of case studies is that analysing socialist urban practices as a “relic” of the past or “residual phenomena” eventually appears to be unproductive, if not a dead end. Socialist principles are embedded into modern urban reality to the extent that they helped to shape it. It is quite evident, therefore, that socialist urban practices are scattered across various fields, incorporated into diverse urban mechanisms, and very often can barely be made distinct from the “non-socialist” ones.

Perhaps the best proof of that is the discussion on socialist modernism to which authors of the book have paid special attention. Is it really possible to draw a clear line between what are called “socialist” and “capitalist” modernisms? And, more importantly, should we seek to do so? If “socialist” and “modernist” urbanists had common sources of inspiration, common attitudes towards the past, common urban planning tools, and continuous exchange of ideas throughout the century, is it so easy to define exactly where their traces are? Certainly, there was a fundamental difference in ideological discourses, slogans, and ways of representation – in the “words”, let’s say – as well as in the form of the land ownership. But, to put aside the issues of perception of space and ideology and leave just the very “material” urban structure, then it becomes rather difficult to find the difference, for instance, between the “capitalist” urban utopia

of Tomas Bata's business empire in the Czech city of Zlin and a purely "socialist city" somewhere in Soviet Magnitogorsk or Sverdlovsk. In addition, if we follow the principle that "a city takes a long time to change" (p.12), the question becomes even more interesting, as the "capitalist" urban legacy of interwar Zlin was eventually perfectly integrated into the socialist urban reality of the postwar Czech Republic.

However, the aspect of perception matters as well. If, to continue the discussions of Markus Kip and Douglas Young on the Berlin's Alexanderplatz, it seems logical to slightly extend their main question: and what is the real "socialist" element in the symbolic and physical transformations of this urban area today? Is there anything "socialist" in its current public perception? Since even the narrative of Ostmoderne (Eastern modernist architecture) which seeks to legitimise the GDR architectural legacy today, is itself a product of the new age and essentially "non-socialist" intellectual debates.

It is apparent that all these questions remain mostly open. But it is the impulse to raise them which is probably the main achievement of this book. Socialist urbanism, complete with its various effects, manifestations, and transformations, clearly demands a fundamental change of vision and a new attitude in the current global context. The contours of this framework at the moment are quite illegible. But whatever shape it will eventually take, it is to be hoped that within this framework socialist urbanisms will get a "life of their own", just like the buildings of socialist era in Bucharest in the new historical circumstances Laura Visan outlines (p.180).

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