

**Ready-made serialism: Images of Uniformity and Transgression in the Post-Socialist City.** On The Radiant City series of Carlos Azeredo Mesquita  
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After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the post-socialist urban landscape became an object of inquiry for a generation of artists. Sometimes seeking to find inspiration in unpredictable spatial configurations, but most often looking for remnants of a once imagined parallel future, these artists began discovering crumbling socialist housing estates as if they were purely aesthetic objects – or on the contrary, genuine folkloric artifacts. The fascination for traces of a failed utopia created a complex framework of perception that functions as a kind of New Orientalism, often called as “Ostalgia”: an optic that directs the ways post-socialist spaces may be seen and represented. Hijacking perception in the polarized realms of the aesthetic and the folkloric, this optic leaves not much space for the analytic regard.

When Westerners tour Eastern European cities, they often find their objects of interest either in the “architectural uncanny” or in the “architectural extraordinary”.<sup>1</sup> Frédéric Chaubin, whose photographs, taken at the peripheries of the former Soviet Union, of buildings that are most often described as “eccentric”, “sci-fi” or “Cosmic Communist Constructions”, is one of the protagonists of the socialist architectural extraordinary.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Ursula Schulz’s photographs of bus shelters in Armenia stage their objects in fashion-show-like situations. Wolfgang Thaler, another photographer of the socialist architectural sublime, is an equally important mediator, in his case between the architectural history of the Balkans and the architectural scene of Central Europe.<sup>3</sup> Be they sensationalist, it is with the help of these photographers and others whose images have been circulating across the art- and architectural world, that Eastern Europeans learned to appreciate a peculiar segment of their built heritage.

In a way, Carlos Azeredo Mesquita shares this fascination, setting himself to “test the myths and ghosts” of the existing socialism. However, assuming his determination to “place this project in the field of the observation and gathering, a hybrid of photography with anthropology and sociology”, the photographer avoids the traps of Ostalgia, resisting the seduction of both the ridiculous and the desperate. In The Radiant City series, Mesquita relies on his anthropological sensibility to make sense of the traces of informal and obsolete structures, and uses photography to capture, reveal, emphasize and organize them.

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<sup>1</sup> See Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the introduction of Chaubin’s show at the Storefront for Art and Architecture, in New York City, available from [http://www.storefrontnews.org/exhibitions\\_events/exhibitions?e=239](http://www.storefrontnews.org/exhibitions_events/exhibitions?e=239) [accessed 8 November 2010].

<sup>3</sup> See for example the travelling Balkanology exhibition ‘Balkanology: Neue Architektur und urbane Phänomene’, Schweizerisches Architekturmuseum, Basel, 4 October – 28 December 2008; Architekturzentrum Wien, Vienna, 22 October 2009 – 18 January 2010.

In contrast to the photographers looking for the architectural extraordinary in post-socialist countries, Mesquita's objects belong to the realm of the ordinary. Nevertheless, they are as important elements of the "socialist environment" as distinguished public buildings. As David Crowley and Susan E. Reid propose in their book on socialist spaces:

"In Soviet discourse, ordinary spaces could become 'Great Spaces' through a connection with the 'grand spatial narratives' of socialism. (...) At the same time, 'social justice', as conceived by Marxist ideology, demanded the 'democratization' of space. Even the 'Greatest Spaces' (...) were 'everyday' in the idealized sense projected by the socialist regimes that they were to be used and possessed by all."<sup>4</sup>

The tension between the objectivity of the camera's mechanical optic and the subjectivity of the human gaze, let alone the individuality of interpretation, has been discussed throughout the history of photographic practice. But the way Mesquita links this tension to the antagonism between the built environment and its uses brings us closer both to the key dilemmas of photography and to those of urbanism. The geometrical precision and uncompromised frontality of The Radiant City series also highlights a very important element in Mesquita's approach: by joining his images into a folded panorama, he wants us to look at the ruined public facilities, abandoned construction sites and invented functions as remnants of an expired spatial order, or units of a past coordinate system aspiring to totality.

### **The Radiant City**

The concept of a total environment, formulated by succeeding communist and socialist regimes, was based on understanding space as a

"socializing project that undertook the formation of a new kind of person or moral subject. New ways of organizing the home, the workplace or the street would, it was claimed, produce new social relations that would, in turn, produce a new consciousness."<sup>5</sup>

Interior design and apartment structures were meant to support preferable family structures, neighborhood relations and ways of living in the same manner as public parks were designed to pacify co-existence and urban districts were planned to facilitate the distribution of work and the logistics of labor, as well as to create an inescapable dependence on the state. Architectural aesthetics and ethics were thus closely intertwined:

„The main goal of the architectural appearance of these towns was to demonstrate the socialist principles and to show the people 'the socialist modes of behaviour'. One of the most important functions of socialist cities was to turn their inhabitants into 'socialist people'."<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, socialist town planning is not only a formal heir of Le Corbusier's modernist concepts: while the building shapes and urban forms of socialist towns and housing districts bear a close resemblance to the famous drawings of the Radiant City's cityscape

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<sup>4</sup> David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, 'Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc', in David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (eds), *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, Oxford/New York: Berg Publishers, 2002, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Sándor Horváth, 'Urban Socialism and Everyday Life in Sztálinváros', in *Berliner Osteuropa Info*, vol. 23, Berlin: Osteuropa Institut, Freie Universität Berlin, 2005, p. 44. Available from [http://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/media/publikationen/boi/boi\\_23/06\\_horvath.pdf](http://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/media/publikationen/boi/boi_23/06_horvath.pdf) [accessed 8 November 2010].

(it is significant that Carlos Azeredo Mesquita chose this title for his series), they also reproduce the belief in architecture's determining force. The emancipatory project of the Radiant City is one of the most controversial missions in architectural history; especially if we take into account its most fundamental premise, the liberation of the human mind by modern architectural forms, emphasized by Le Corbusier himself:

„The house that can be built for modern man (and the city too), a magnificently disciplined machine, can bring back the liberty of the individual—at present crushed out of existence—to each and every member of society,”<sup>7</sup>

Socialist architectural thinking eventually went farther than that. Design and planning here became tools not as much to emancipate the individual, as to reshape the human being in general. Tony Wood in his essay on Soviet avantgarde architecture describes the way Konstantin Melnikov, an eminent architect of the early years of the régime, created plans of buildings where sleeping was to be controlled.<sup>8</sup> The Sonata of Sleep, as Melnikov called the building, was meant to provide for perfect sleep with sounds, scents, appropriate temperature, humidity and air pressure. This idea of a total environment represented an extraordinary example of the „fantasy of control over the entire sensory experience”<sup>9</sup>. Wood concludes his essay assuming that „communism, then, was to be not simply a shift in property relations, but a frontal assault on the confines of human nature.”<sup>10</sup>

However, planners' control over urban development was clearly limited; socialist space had been formed in the “shifting and multi-layered interaction between spatial organization, expression and use.”<sup>11</sup> Contradictions between planning and everyday use were particularly spectacular in the case of Sztálinváros (now Dunaújváros) the par excellence socialist town in Hungary: from its early days on, the gap between plans and the mental geographies of its habitants had been progressively widening; urban nodes and commercial corridors were shifting away from where they had been planned. The town's Bauhaus-trained planner, Tibor Weiner was entirely conscious of the degree to which political and ideological concepts of the town's desired order were discordant from its actual life. In his description of the first years of the town, he started questioning the “possibility of planning”, the ability to plan for the depths organically provided by historical towns:

„Already in the first phase of planning, it became obvious that the notion of the ‚planned town‘ is, under these circumstances, false. It became clear that a town, built at once, in a transitional historical period – in the first years of socialism –, has its own laws of growth, just as other urban organisms do, which were born in a historical process. (...) The planned city should provide for at least the quality of life of the organic city, where the gradual evolution of times gave birth to the most diverse frames of moods: shining avenues with dizzying traffic, intimate homes, or corners of solitude and exasperation. If we plan a new town – is it possible to plan in these depths?”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Le Corbusier, *The Radiant City: Elements of a Doctrine of Urbanism to be Used as the Basis of Our Machine-Age Civilization*, New York: Orion Press, 1967, p. 143.

<sup>8</sup> Tony Wood, ‘Bodies at Rest’, *Cabinet Magazine* (New York), no. 24, 2007, p. 21-23.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Crowley and Reid, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Tibor Weiner, ‘Sztálinváros’, in Aladár Sós (ed.), *Sztálinváros, Miskolc, Tatabánya: Városépítésünk*

## The crisis of the post-socialist city

The deviation of planned spaces by their users has accelerated since the fall of the Berlin Wall. If public spaces were a crucial component of the creation of socialist subjects and communities, logically, they also became the scenes where architectural concepts and spatial configurations were most spectacularly overwritten by everyday uses; especially after losing the legitimacy of their organizing principles. But first these spaces had to fail – permanently, as Carlos Azeredo Mesquita's images substantiate. Ping-pong tables without a net, empty concrete tree planters, pipes running along the motorway, abandoned foundations of a building that never transcended its two-dimensional floor plans; these are all ruins of a parallel future, never to be achieved.

The notion of the future is a key element in the conception of housing estates: corresponding to the official egalitarian ideology of socialism, new socialist towns were to represent the official images of cities of the future, “where there will be no poverty, beggars, and periphery”.<sup>13</sup> Designed to accommodate the future's citizens, socialist cities, and especially the housing estates of the 1970s and 1980s, had developed a peculiar relationship to technology. They were sites of experimentation (the comfort of central heating and of the integrated water supply system made a very strong impression on their first inhabitants) but eventually became culs-de-sac of technologies gradually gone obsolete. Internal garbage collection systems, for instance, are hardly in use anywhere today, but still occupy a lot of room in various types of prefabricated buildings, like dead limbs attached to agonizing bodies. In buildings where every function is pre-conceived and prefabricated in the house factory, one quickly loses the awareness of how buildings and apartments operate, alienated from the technological supply framework one depends on. Technical systems become visible when they fail to deliver. As Kazys Varnelis writes about the architecture of crises: „To understand the technical systems that support a society – roads, bridges, water supply, wastewater, flood management, telecommunications, gas and electric lines – as one category, it was first necessary to see it fail.”<sup>14</sup>

The technological crisis of prefabricated buildings has unfolded parallel to the social crisis of public spaces. Paradoxically, the socialist ideal of designing an equal society with the help of equally distributed resources and services has been partially achieved by the dynamisms that have worn out the public spaces in-between housing blocks: areas without specific spatial emphases failed to offer room for sociability; the playgrounds, parking lots, parks and abandoned construction sites have merged into an all-encompassing entropic field whose unity is only broken by the fences delineating lands recently annexed by expansive private property owners.

This homogeneity is enforced by the omnipresence of concrete. Concrete is the lingua franca of socialist-era housing estates: ping-pong tables, benches, parasols, parking platforms, tree planters, paths are all made of it; concrete is so ubiquitous that one gets the impression that it is a vital framework for islands of nature to survive. This illusion –

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fejlődése, Budapest: Műszaki Könyvkiadó, 1959, p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> András Sándor, Sztálinváros, Budapest: Népszava, 1951, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> Kazys Varnelis, ‘Systems Gone Wild: Infrastructures after Modernity’, in Volume C-Lab Issue (Rotterdam), 2009, Available from <http://c-lab.columbia.edu/0162.html> [accessed 8 November 2010]

the vision of a controllable nature – does however quickly give its place to the recognition that nature has, with the years, grown out of this framework. As we see in the images of Mesquita, weeds grow in the interstices of concrete steps, pavements and tree planters turning their ensemble into a landscape of ruins.

In a recent essay, Kai Vöckler points out that architectural thinking rediscovered the concept of ruins in the 1960s, and has been influenced by it ever since: artists and architects like Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson developed practices like “anarchitecture” or “de-architecturization” to intensify architecture’s confrontation with the forces of nature.<sup>15</sup> Artists’ fascination for ruins has gone parallel to the decline of faith in modernism: ruins – with a sense of irreversibility embodied in them – are vehicles of modernity’s “self-criticism”, fuelled by a fear of nature taking over culture.<sup>16</sup> Ruins remind us that “the idea of progress is always already in the state of catastrophe” and that only when such novel commodities, architectures and confident expressions to the idea of progress fall into ruin and decay does their initial promise reveal its hollowness and its frailty.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, modernism’s most spectacular ruins are the ruins of the socialist city.

### **Rules and counter-uses**

When the hardware of the city – architecture and urbanism – fails, it is the software – uses and dispositions – that has to create the framework for the city’s functioning. When the artificial separation of residential, industrial, commercial and leisure functions in the modernist city proves to be obstructive rather than unfettering, when the government abandons its poorest citizens, these latter have no other choice than reinventing themselves by transgressing regulations. Paths trodden across the lawn are traces of deviations from the prescribed spatial order; the containers piled into multi-storey kiosks or the caravans parked along the street are agents of an informal economy, while garages are spaces delineated and privatized from the no man’s land referred to as public realm. These practices are made possible by a logic highly different from that of the planned city: relying on their “anthropological, poetic and mythic experience of space”, the “ordinary practitioners down below (produce) the migrational, or metaphorical city (that) slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city”, as Michel de Certeau suggested in his highly influential essay “Walking in the City”.<sup>18</sup>

Carlos Azeredo Mesquita looks exactly at these practices: without romanticizing the subversive spatial practices he photographs (after all, many of these subversions are driven by a desire to expand one’s private property), he offers an objective look at the microscopic metamorphosis of post-socialist spaces. Obviously, private disposition of common land or buildings, as well as of informal vendors’ kiosks existed well before the

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<sup>15</sup> Kai Vöckler, ‘The Disappearance of Architecture as an Artistic Theme’, in Sabine Folie (ed.), *Modernism as a Ruin: An Archeology of the Present*, Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2009, p. 150-153.

<sup>16</sup> Andreas Huyssen, ‘Nostalgia for Ruins’, in *Grey Room 23* (Cambridge, MA), Spring 2006, p. 6-21.

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Hetherington, ‘Memories of Capitalism: Cities, Phantasmagoria and Arcades’, in *Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, (Hoboken, NJ), 2005/1, p. 191.

<sup>18</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 114.

fall of the socialist regime. From the 1970s on, the introduction of capitalist elements in the socialist economy contributed not only to the emergence of a new, consumerist lifestyle, but also to the development of a massive “second economy”: often criticized, blamed, but tolerated.

The destiny of the caravans captured by Mesquita is exemplary. In the early 1990s, at the onset of a harsh economic crisis, informal food markets emerged in various locations of Budapest, as well as in many other significant towns. With their flexible, mobile homes or commercial units, vendors could position themselves where established market situations needed correction, contributing to a more balanced distribution and accessibility of resources, that is, in this case, food. For an important segment of society, markets became a veritable medium of survival, both in terms of selling and buying. With time, however, caravans also became permanent elements of the urban landscape: they found themselves frozen in newly constituted “streets”, like remnants of a holiday trip turned permanent and stationary. Paradoxically, while breaking the codes of uniformity imposed upon dwellers by the rigidity of modernist planning, caravans also assemble into new patterns and new types of uniformity.

This “informal uniformity” is the basis of the serial dimension of Mesquita’s work. In contrast to photographers’ genuine folkloric interest in everyday uses of housing estates, he does not show these uses, but lets us imagine them, by displaying people’s imprints rather than people. There is nothing in his images from the postcard-like anecdotic beauty and romantic disorder of Imre Benkő’s or Károly Hemző’s famous photographs of housing estates; Mesquita remains objective, frontal, close to the serial–conceptualist tradition of photography.

### **The rehabilitation of the ordinary: ready-made serialism**

When modernism’s confidence to fulfill its democratizing and emancipatory architectural mission began to tremble, theoretical concepts of transparency, sincerity and legible form also started to teeter. Parallel to the increasing critique of centralized planning and, consequentially, the dethronement of the planner and the architect, the architectural object also underwent dramatic mutations. Among a series of books, exhibitions and other events that participated at the ousting of exceptional buildings from the centre of architectural discourses, there were a few which were particularly inspiring for an audience larger than the usual public of architecture: Bernard Rudofsky’s “Architecture without Architects” in 1964, Reyner Banham’s “Architecture of Four Ecologies” in 1971 and Robert Venturi’s “Learning Las Vegas” in 1972 undertook the rehabilitation of the ordinary and the banal in architecture.<sup>19</sup>

So far, architectural history had been mostly focusing on exceptional architectural structures. To expand this field to include advertisements, highways and vernacular buildings was a truly radical step in the redefinition of architecture – and consequentially in the redefinition of photography inspired by architecture. In his “26 Gasoline Stations”

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<sup>19</sup> Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*, London: Academy Editions, 1964; Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, New York: Harper & Row, 1971; Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972.

and “Every Building on the Sunset Trip” projects, published respectively in 1963 and 1966, the American artist Ed Ruscha introduced the logic of “architectural inventory” in contemporary art: the act of assembling photographs of buildings of the same type was not only inspired by an aesthetic of serialism, and the conceptual task of researching and collecting, but also by an appreciation of the ordinary.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the work of German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher was influenced by their experience of analogous industrial structures scattered around the Ruhr region; in their book “Anonymous Sculptures: A Typology of Technical Construction”, published in 1970, they gave aesthetic value to derelict industrial constructions.<sup>21</sup>

Carlos Azeredo Mesquita’s series are more straightforward: they are in fact panoramic reproductions of actual spatial configurations, with the depicted objects (ping-pong tables, tree planters, wall foundations, containers, garages) coexisting side-by-side. In the Radiant City, standards, types and repetition are not constructed but are found on-site: as elements of the geometry of everyday life, they constitute a “série trouvée”, a ready-made serialism. Mesquita investigates housing estates like an urban scanner moving along straight routes; by separating his objects and reducing each image to include only one object, the photographer positions his work on a fine line between panorama and serial photography, creating a delicate tension between the whole and the part, the serial format and the individual differences. This tension exists also in many other dimensions of his work: between the machine-like objectivity of the photographer’s regard and the fragile, spontaneous nature of his objects, or between positions of documentary photography and conceptual inventory. And these are the tensions that make Carlos Azeredo Mesquita an inspiring explorer of the existing Radiant City. For tensions of scale, of viewpoints, of uniformity and difference are at the heart of the Radiant City’s inherent contradictions: those between plans and everyday life, where users permanently overwrite the rules encoded in space. As Tibor Weiner meditated about the future of new towns in 1958:

„Life rounds off the edges of the crystal, softens its hard forms and shapes its surroundings. This is why we consciously have to leave room for evolution. The organism can not be as hard as to resist the perpetually moving, transforming life, because it then becomes inhuman.“<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ed Ruscha, *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*, Los Angeles: National Excelsior Press, 1963; Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, Los Angeles: National Excelsior Press, 1966.

<sup>21</sup> Hilla and Bernd Becher, ‘Anonymous Sculpture’, *Art and Artists* (Düsseldorf), no. 5, 1970.

<sup>22</sup> Weiner, p. 78.