

Actually-Existing Success: Economics, Aesthetics and the Specificity of (Still-)Socialist Urbanism.

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Abstract

A quarter century following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the people's democracies, many of the dwellings, utilities and public spaces built by these regimes continue to be cherished by their inhabitants and users – increasingly so as post-socialist urban landscapes undergo an ever-intensifying process of neoliberal 're-privatization', de-planning and spatial as well as economic stratification. Scholars, however, continue to produce accounts emphasizing how socialist cities and buildings – as well as the audacious social goals built into them – failed. This article provides a critical overview of recent literature on built socialism, identifying a tension between two parallel ethnographic and historical narratives: one, which argues that built socialism failed, because it was too obsessed with the economy and industry, and neglected every other aspect of social life; and a directly contradictory set of accounts, which pins the blame for failure on built socialism's alleged fixation with aesthetic or discursive realms, and its corresponding neglect of the economy. The article closes by suggesting some pathways for comparative scholarship, which considers built socialism not only in terms of collapse and disintegration, but also of success and endurance; not only in terms of *either* economy *or* aesthetics, but also of their reciprocal inter-determination and co-dependence; and not only through the lens of imported theories, but also through 'vernacular' or 'emic' concepts, rooted in the specificities and singularities of the socialist city itself.

Keywords: architecture, urbanism, socialism, postsocialism, modernity, social condenser, anthropology, Marxism, Lefebvre, Russian Revolution, Warsaw, Moscow

INTRODUCTION: SOCIALISM FAILED?

Students of the social sciences and humanities are well acquainted with the trajectories of numerous state socialist architecture and planning flops. From Magnitogorsk (Kotkin 1997) to Moscow (Buchli 2000), from Berlin (Weszkalnys 2010) to Belaya Kalitva (Collier 2011), from Nizhnii Novgorod (DeHaan 2013) to Nowa Huta (Lebow 2013), from Dunaújváros (Fehérvári 2013) to Vinh City (Schwenkel 2015), scholars have composed meticulous studies, which spell out how state socialist architectural and planning schemes failed to achieve their ambitious goals: often both in terms of the shoddiness of their physical matter, as well as in terms of the transformative social reform projects that were associated with them. In most of these cases, failure tends to be understood by those who diagnose it as an unforeseen consequence of overly rigid or naively reductive planning, incapable of making room for the complexities of everyday life and the contingencies of the passage of time.¹

Back in 2005, anthropologist Caroline Humphrey pointed to the prevalence of a failure-centric perspective in scholarly understandings of Soviet planning projects in the 1920s and 1930s: “It has become a familiar idea that the early Soviet goal fell to pieces ... overwhelmed not so much by overt opposition as by the teeming practices of life that had their own and different logics” (2005: 40). As Humphrey noted, this was the major emphasis of earlier, landmark studies of socialist architecture and urbanism (Kotkin 1997; Buchli 2000), influenced by post-structuralist theorists of practice, discipline and textuality, such as Michel De Certeau, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. And this tendency has continued in work produced during the last decade, when these influences have been supplemented by burgeoning theories of materiality, affect or complexity,² as well as by politically libertarian, theoretically post-structuralist ideas about resilience and resistance to state-logics, best exemplified by the work of anthropologist James Scott (1999).

Buoyed by this theoretical fecundity, “socialism failed” has, I argue, become normalized

as an ingrained discursive form, over-determining the way in which socialist architecture and planning is framed in the literature, even if its implications are at odds with the intentions of the authors or the empirical substance of their work.³ Thus Katherine Lebow's *Nowa Huta* is an "unfinished utopia," where "a great deal of what was ultimately built in this planned city was ... paradoxically unplanned, while much of what was planned remained unbuilt" (2013: 16); Gisa Weszkalnys sees the fate of Berlin's Alexanderplatz as one of the "disintegration of a socialist exemplar" (2013: 68); Heather DeHaan's Stalin-era Nizhnii Novgorod is a case study in "how visionary planning failed" (2013: 59). Christina Schwenkel's East German-built housing project in socialist Vietnam was a "routine, fractal, 'always-almost-falling-apart' world" (2015: 520, citing Jackson 2014: 222) in which the "unrealized dream of egalitarian infrastructure" (*ibid.*: 527) was laid bare. In a twist on the failure narrative, Stephen Collier's book on Belaya Kalitva and Rodniki concedes that, by the very end of the Soviet period and by the standards of its own "normative rationality," the Soviet city-building may have achieved some of its basic goals. This success, however, was "pyrrhic." "What is remarkable," writes Collier, "is not [the USSR's] ability to create 'ideal cities of the future' but its utterly pathological inability to do anything else" (2011: 112).

Scholarly accounts of built socialism's shortcomings and disintegrations have contributed a great deal to our understanding of the material culture of modernity. The extent to which failure-centrism been elevated into an axiom in the literature on built socialism, however, is not only empirically misleading; it is also a remarkably persistent remnant of a Cold War-rooted ideology, which cast socialist modernity as a perverted version of modernity proper, failure-bound from the beginning.⁴ As Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov has observed, Soviet modernity was co-constituted by its own – explicit and acknowledged – narratives of material and infrastructural failure. These failure narratives, however, were distinct from the "neoliberal view of modernity," one of whose self-affirmations was the idea

that “its geopolitical competitor, Soviet-style state socialism, was a historical error”; and that socialist modernity “failed, because it was rooted in erroneously-conceived human nature and in erroneously-conceived types of economy and polity” (2016: 691).

Almost three decades following the end of the Cold War, a kindred type of failure-centrism continues to occupy a powerful, perhaps dominant, position in scholarship on socialist architecture and planning. Consequently, scholarly descriptions frequently slip into a default position, which exaggerates collapse and calamity; and makes authors much more likely to elide or obscure real instances of built socialist success and endurance from their published work. The dominance of failure-centrism is not only misleading and ideologically-inflected, but also quite puzzling, given the extent to which many of the dwellings, utilities and public spaces built by socialist regimes continue to be cherished by their inhabitants and users; and given the fact that testimonies to these successes and endurances (whether rendered in ethnographic, archival or quantitative registers) do frequently make their way into scholarly accounts – albeit more-often-than-not as backgrounded mid-chapter narratives, rhetorically overshadowed by the failure-centric tones prevailing in titles, sub-headings and concluding statements.

The specificities of our urban age render the persistence of “socialism failed” even more remarkable and politically unnerving. Second World urban landscapes are currently being subjected to intensifying – often violent, sometimes lawless – processes of restitution and “re-privatization,” neoliberal de-planning and spatial and economic stratification.⁵ Against the background of this on-going degradation, it becomes all the more urgent to highlight and comprehend the processes, technologies and ideas which underlay built socialism’s numerous successes and endurances. So long as some of the physical, institutional, symbolic and political-economic remainders of built socialist modernity are still in place and functioning, and so long as they continue to be sold-off, dismantled and neglected, so long do reasons

persist for scholars not only to cast a critical, counter-hegemonic eye on the commodified architecture and urbanism of today and tomorrow; but also to deploy the theoretical and methodological resources at our disposal to exhume, expose and explore the substantively progressive elements of our socialist modern yesterday (and, in some cases, our still-socialist today).

The aim of this article, then, is to call into question some of the ways in which the story of built-socialism-as-failure is told. For there is more than a hint of Cold War triumphalist *Schadenfreude*—or of *Fehlerfreude*—in continuing to revel in built socialism’s dilapidations and disintegrations. One hundred years after the 1917 October Revolution, in an era of unprecedented urban privation and inequality, we may, in fact, have a lot to learn from the still-existing achievements and enduring legacies of built socialism.

Base and Superstructure: Kunststadt versus Industriestadt

There is a rich, multi-disciplinary field of scholarship on socialist and post-socialist cities and I cannot aspire to represent it comprehensively in this article. Instead, I begin by delineating two discrete ethnographic and historical narratives on built socialism’s failure, and on identifying a curious tension between them. The first holds that built socialism failed, because it was exaggeratedly obsessed with the economy and industry, and neglected every other aspect of social life; the second, meanwhile, pins the blame for failure on socialism’s alleged fixation with the aesthetic, spectacular, epistemic or ideological realms, and its corresponding neglect of the economy. One school of thought, in other words, argues that built socialism collapsed because it was *too economic*, while the other contends that it was *not economic enough*. Because the latter, “de-economizing” narrative is less familiar—and perhaps more counter-intuitive—I devote more attention here to evaluating its claims in detail. This body of scholarship includes literature explicitly dealing with architecture and

urbanism, but also work which deploys the built environment of Eastern Block cities as a metaphor or illustration for a broader narrative about the ultimate failure (or inherently “illusory” nature) of socialism.

The arguments of the “de-economizers” echo a claim made by French Marxist spatial thinker Henri Lefebvre about architecture under state socialism. Posing the question, “Has socialism produced a space of its own?,” Lefebvre answers in the negative. Under socialism, “no architectural innovation has occurred, no specific space has been created” (2011 [1971]: 55). Therefore, says Lefebvre, it is illegitimate to speak of socialism at all, because “a revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses” (2011: 54).⁶ The phrasing of Lefebvre’s rather sweeping dismissal of built socialism’s ability to produce a “specific space” provides the point of departure for the second part of this essay, focused on laying out pathways for comparative research on built socialism, which does not take failure or obsolescence for granted. Thanks to a rapid increase in the volume and quality of cross-disciplinary empirical and theoretical work produced during the last ten years, scholars are now well-equipped, I show here, to provide informed answers to increasingly ambitious questions about the “specific spaces,” which, contra Lefebvre, built socialism *did* create.⁷ What kinds of aesthetics, proprietorial arrangements, building forms and modes of urban life did socialist regimes produce, which capitalist ones could not have? How and why did many of these specific socialist spaces succeed as well as fail: not merely, contra Lefebvre again, on the level of “superstructure,” but on a more foundational level too? And which of these specific socialist spaces continue not only to endure today, but to remain “still-socialist” – to function in a manner that resists appropriation into circuits of capital accumulation, despite the collapse of the political economic system that made them possible in the first place?⁸

Let me say a final word on the manner in which I have deployed the categories of failure

and success in this essay. Much recent work in anthropology and adjacent disciplines has sought to highlight the generative capacity, open-endedness or social “potentiality” contained within failure (Latour 1996; Hommels 2005; Miyazaki and Riles 2005; Abrams and Weszkalnys 2013; Appadurai 2016). The editors of one recent volume on “material failure,” for example, call for scholars to seek deep understandings of what happens “when things fail to cohere with expectation, when they do not do what they are supposed to do” (Jeevandrapillai et al. 2017). This article, however, proceeds from the premise that it may be just as fruitful to seek an understanding of what happens when things, perhaps against all odds, succeed in cohering with expectation, *when they do end up doing what they were supposed to*.

Another reason for making use of this rather loaded category in a study of socialist and post-socialist built environments is that success—a very different kind of success from the hyper-individualized notion, which predominates in capitalist societies (including post-socialist ones)—figured extremely prominently as a *telos* for the designers, ideologues, builders and implementers of these environments: for those setting out the parameters for what it was that socialism’s cities and buildings were supposed to achieve. If, as Stephen Collier accepts, the socialist city can be considered to have been a success according to the categories of its own “normative rationality” (in other words, on its own terms), should not that be enough? If scholars are interested in stepping beyond Cold War victorhood, ought we not be driven by the emic imperative to understand state socialist (or still-socialist) cities (or societies) *on their own terms*?⁹ With this ambition in mind, this essay concludes by considering several “emic” or “vernacular” concepts—taken from the ideological and theoretical oeuvre of socialist (and Marxist) architecture and urbanism itself—in terms of their usefulness for making sense of the twenty-first-century lingerings and endurances of built socialist modernity.

SOCIALISM FAILED

Base and Superstructure: Kunststadt versus Industriestadt

The Marxist dualism between determining (economic) foundation (*Basis*) and determined superstructure (*Überbau*)—itself an architectural metaphor in the original German—is at the core of a contradiction in the failure-centric literature between two distinct schools of thought. One narrative, encompassing authors like Kotkin and Collier, proposes that the socialist city failed, because it was too rigidly focused on industry and on the economy. The “socialist city of the future,” writes Kotkin, fell victim “to the force, which not only lorded it over the Soviet city, but which conquered the terrain and the population: the factory” (Kotkin 1997: 143). Soviet “enterprise-centric modernity,” in Collier’s rendition, constituted “merely an adjunct to industrial enterprise” (2011: 187). The socialist city failed, then, because it rested on a narrowly economic conception of the base, to the neglect of everything else. It failed, because it was too economic (indeed, *too Marxist*) for its own good.¹⁰

According to the second narrative, by contrast, the actually-existing state socialist project “inverted” the Marxian causality between determined cultural superstructure and determining economic infrastructure. From this “de-economizing” point of view, socialist regimes (and the cities they built) were primarily aesthetic (or epistemic, discursive or performative) in nature. The socialist city failed, because it was not economic (or *not Marxist*) enough—or because its economy was illusory, imagined. Socialism may have been spoken, dreamt, willed and envisioned, but, *actually*, it was *not-even-existing*.¹¹

There are interesting tensions within the periodizations, which the economy-centrists and de-economizers adopt. Collier, for example, locates the emergence of Soviet urban “enterprise-centrism” during the early 1930s (the first years of Stalinism), a time during which “mundane,” “economic” questions allegedly won out over the utopic fantasies of the

homo sovieticus-forging 1920s. Developments in Soviet city-building from the early 1930s onwards are best understood, says Collier, in terms of the “end of theoretical speculation about the proper form of the socialist city and the renewed emphasis on the practical problems of planning new cities around industrial enterprise” (2011: 80). From the early Stalin years onwards, which Collier sees as the formative Soviet period, purely “architectural” or “aesthetic” aspects of city design were gradually pushed out of the field of planning priorities.

In her study of political-intellectual life in 1930s Moscow, however, literary scholar and cultural historian Katerina Clark says precisely the opposite thing. According to Clark, the distinguishing thing about the 1930s, which she also sees as the formative Soviet decade, was that this was a time during which *the cultural came to eclipse the economic*. The Soviet Union may have been “ostensibly committed to increasing production, to churning out all those tractors and pig iron, to “catching up and surpassing the West” in the economic sphere ... yet culture emerged as the area defining Soviet identity.” (2011: 9) Adapting the work of historian Josef Chytry (1989), Clark argues that the (in her view, unfulfilled) “ideal standing before” the Soviet Union in the 1930s was that of the “aesthetic city” (*Kunststadt*), defined as “a social and political community that accords primacy to the aesthetic dimension in human consciousness and activity.” (Chytry 1989, cited in Clark 2011: 12) The *Kunststadt*, in other words, is the direct negation of Collier or Kotkin’s “enterprise-centric” monotown (or “*Industriestadt*”).

Clark’s account focuses on Moscow Stalin-era intellectuals’ cultivation of a vision of a global communist ecumene centered around Moscow. The book’s title, *Moscow: The Fourth Rome*, is derived from an unrealized film project of Sergei Eisenstein’s. In a 1933 article, Eisenstein invokes a sixteenth-century epistle according to which ascendant Muscovy was destined, following the fall of Constantinople, to become the “Third Rome.” 1930s Moscow,

in turn, was to be, in Eisenstein's words, "the concentration of the socialist future of the entire world" (Clark 2011: 1). Clark's book is also, to some extent, a chronicle of failure. By the end of the Stalin period, she says in her concluding paragraph, "Moscow had not become a Fourth Rome" (ibid.: 350). Eisenstein had not made his film, and Moscow did not become the cosmos-condensing communist metropole its intellectuals dreamed of.

Clark's failure narrative is underpinned by an architectural story pivoted around the Palace of the Soviets, the 415-meter skyscraper, topped by a 100-meter statue of Lenin, a 1934 drawing of whose design graces the book's dustjacket. The Palace of the Soviets was to become the tallest building in the world and the new centerpiece not only of Moscow (superseding the Kremlin), but of the projected communist cosmos. The nineteenth-century Cathedral of Christ the Savior was demolished to make way for the Palace in 1934, but the Palace itself was, famously, never completed. Its construction, which began in 1937, was halted following the outbreak of war with Germany in 1941. The project, though officially resumed after 1945, was shelved in Khrushchev's time, its vast circular foundation pit turned into a heated open-air swimming pool, a bucolic, steam-bathed folly in the crater of utopia. After 1991, in turn, the new influence of the Russian Orthodox Church (newly rich, having regained ownership of many assets seized by Soviet authorities) was expressed in the fast-paced rebuilding of the old basilica on its historical site. As the always-chimerical crystallization of the never-to-be Soviet communist future, then, the Palace of the Soviets constitutes, in Clark's account as well as in those of numerous other scholars, the archetypal architectural metaphor of its failure.¹²

De-Economizing Socialism (Inverting the Inversion)

Clark's *Kunststadt* narrative belongs within an increasingly-established tradition in the

historiography and theory of socialist culture. Art critic Boris Groys, for example, refers to Stalin's Soviet Union as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a "total work of art") and proclaims that "the highest goal in the building of socialism is ... aesthetic, and socialism itself is regarded as the supreme measure of beauty." (1992: 75) Sociologist Andreas Glaeser promotes an "epistemic explanation of the failure of socialism" in contrast to an economic or political one. Glaeser expresses his argument as an inversion of Marx's inversion of Hegel (Marx claimed to have "stood Hegel on his head," substituting Hegel's idealist dialectic for a materialist one). "Anyone who approaches state socialist societies with a Marxian base-superstructure model in mind," says Glaeser, "is in for a big surprise... socialist practices and ideologies have de facto inverted that model" (2011: 65). For philosopher Vladislav Todorov, "communism's political economy is a simulative one." Rather than functioning as an actual "economically-motivated society," communism, in fact, generates only the "initially appearance of such as society" (1991: 683). Because communist societies, in effect, pretend to be economic, when actually they are purely aesthetic, says Todorov, "the fundamental academic field of communism" lies not in "political economy" but in "political aesthetics" (Ibid.) Todorov's sentiments are echoed closely by cultural historian Evgeny Dobrenko, according to whom the political, economic and social aspects of state socialism (and Stalinism in particular) should be seen as superstructural products of its aesthetics, rather than vice-versa. Appealing unabashedly to a naturalized market understanding of economics, Dobrenko writes: "the mystical political economy of socialism, which lacks any foundation in human nature, can be understood only in terms of aesthetics" (2007: 6). Drawing on Foucault's notion of a "non-economic analysis" (1980: 89), Dobrenko sketches the outline of a sort of socialist hyper-realism, in which "mode of production" becomes "code of production" (2007: 20) and a "fictitious world" is created, "in which people live and even drive on non-existent highways" (2007: 30).

Numerous scholars have recently deployed kindred de-economizing theorizations in historical or ethnographic studies of built socialism. For historian Heather DeHaan (drawing on Dobrenko), for example, the work of Stalin-era planners in the city of Nizhnii Novgorod “should be assessed primarily in terms of performance. It should be viewed not only as visual art, but also as dramatic art.” (2013: 13) This was a drama, says DeHaan, which not only failed to be translated into reality, but which was a failure even in performative terms (ibid.: 163): “As a drama of stage and audience, their [the planners’] city beautiful remained hopelessly off script. ... Although conforming to the vague outlines of the soviet narratives of socialism and modern progress, this drama was always caught in a two-way translation between the visuality of text and the messiness of action—a tension that forever unsettled the best of planners’ designs for the soviet city.” Anthropologist Christina Schwenkel—framing her article with an epigraph from Todorov’s essay—describes the decay of East German-designed prefabricated housing in Vinh City. Schwenkel’s historical description vividly brings home the socialist internationalist geopolitical context, as well as the background of material and human devastation—inflicted by the American aerial bombardments of 1964–1973—in which the “socialist reconstruction of the flattened city” took place (2015: 526). In the first days following the completion of Vinh’s prefabricated buildings, residents expressed delight in their new apartments, and photographed themselves standing against the background of the project’s spectacular, gushing fountains. Shortly after the German technicians left, however, the fountain was switched off. Before long, what Schwenkel calls Vinh’s “hopeful dreamworlds of modernity” turned into disappointment. This “spectacular infrastructure, with its visual technopolitics that promised a better world, is now an abject sign of future uncertainty with the looming prospect of demolition” (ibid.: 531). Vietnam’s urban modernity, in Schwenkel’s words, amounted to a “façade,” which “could not be maintained without plumes of cascading water to hold the fantasy in place.” (2015: 531). In

this narrative of the failure of socialist hope, Schwenkel mirrors DeHaan's emphasis on the Nizhnii Novgorod planners' failures as symbolic of the failure of socialist hope in general: "From planned cities to a socialist paradise, the entire Soviet system revolved around hope - always inspiring, always unfulfilled" (2011: 163).

There have also been numerous non-aesthetic de-economizing accounts of state socialism's failure, some of which make explicit reference to architecture and urbanism. The core chapter of Alexei Yurchak's book about late socialist "hegemony of form" begins with a reference to the plot of the 1973 romantic comedy *Irony of Fate*, one of the most popular films made in the USSR, to this day ritually rebroadcast by TV networks throughout the former Soviet world every New Year's Eve. Zhenya, the film's protagonist, accidentally gets sent on a plane from Moscow to Leningrad by his friends following a drunken festive *banya* session. Barely conscious on arrival, he orders a cab to his Moscow address—the arch-typical Third Constructors' Street (*Tret'ya Ulitsa Stroiteley*), Building 25, Flat 12—only to be driven to an identical location in Leningrad. Not only is the address the same, but the prefabricated buildings look identical too, the keys fit, and the apartment Zhenya winds up in is fitted out with the same set of flatpack Polish furniture as his Moscow flat. Following much farce, turmoil and merriment, Zhenya, of course, ends up falling in love with Nadya, the inhabitant of his Leningrad doppelgänger address.

In Yurchak's analysis, "This comedy makes apparent the standardization and predictability of Soviet life in the 1970s, when street names, architectural styles, door keys, and household possessions seemed completely interchangeable" (2005: 37). In Yurchak's theorization, this monotony in the "non-linguistic registers" of the material and aesthetic was a symptom of shifts, which occurred first and foremost in language, "at syntactic, morphological, semantic, narrative, stylistic, temporal, and other levels" (*ibid.*). Yurchak argues that the "constative" (that is, pertaining to the speaker's intentions) dimension of

Soviet authoritative discourse gradually came to take a back-seat to its performative dimension. This increasing performativity of language (and by extension, of life) lent Soviet “officialize” an appearance of deadening, monolithic stability; but it also rendered the state’s discursive sphere vulnerable to the creation of “unanticipated meaning,” and ultimately rendered it fragile in the face of its sudden implosion during the Gorbachev years.

Soviet authoritative discourse, and the system whose fragility its utterances masked, may indeed have evaporated with unexpected rapidness. Despite the demolitions of many housing projects, especially those from the Khrushchev-era 1950s and 1960s, socialism’s built legacy has, so far at least, proven far more obdurate than the socialist system itself (not to speak of its discursive practices). The greater share of the buildings and cities constructed by socialist regimes continue to stand to this day, and to constitute the spatial, aesthetic and everyday built landscapes of enormous swathes of the twenty-first century globe. How can we characterize, compare and contrast, then, the relationships between materiality, technology, economics and aesthetics underlying the destruction and survival of built socialism?

Re-Economizing Socialism: Turning to Property

Although there is little consideration of economic processes in the de-economizers’ analyses, their understandings of the economy are by no means reducible to one another. Yurchak, for example, makes clear that his theorization is not necessarily incompatible with an economic explanation of socialism’s collapse (2005: 27). However Dobrenko, probably the most hardline among the de-economizers, repeatedly states that the theoretical edifice he constructs is founded on an assumed equation between the private ownership of property and “human nature.” The key characteristic of the “political economy of socialism,” says Dobrenko, “is its idealism (that is, complete indifference to both human nature and to the

laws of production)” (2007: 3).

Walter Benjamin’s analysis of fascism’s political aesthetics, Dobrenko suggests, is incomplete. Fascism’s aestheticization of politics is merely “superstructural,” says Dobrenko, because “under fascism, the former economic “basis” is preserved” (2007: 39). Communism, by contrast, “goes much deeper by changing property relations” (ibid.). Communism, in other words, carries out a much more radical, and—by implication—more *unnatural* aestheticization (from the point of view of Dobrenko’s understanding of “human nature”) by attempting to tinker not just with the superstructure, but also with the base. The only way for the economy to be “real,” this line of thinking implies, is for private property to function untampered-with. Any attempt to bring about the common ownership of property is—for Dobrenko—inherently illusory.

Here, Dobrenko’s polemic hinges on a fundamental misunderstanding (or purposeful misreading) of Benjamin’s take on the relationship between base and superstructure, political economy and art or property relations and aesthetics. Benjamin writes (2008: 42): “Fascism attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses while leaving intact the property relations which they strive to abolish. It sees its salvation in granting expression to the masses—but on no account granting them rights. The masses have a *right* to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them *expression* in keeping these relations unchanged. *The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life.... Communism replies by politicizing art.*”

The entire point of Benjamin’s argument is that it is fascism, which obfuscates the *non-economic* character of the societal transformation it purports to carry out by turning the political economy into an aesthetic project. Fascism turns the base into a servant of the superstructure. Communism, by contrast, *actually* transforms the economic foundation of society. Communism turns the superstructure—including its artistic and architectural

components—into a reflection of the non-capitalist political-economic order, which arises from revolutionary transformation; and into a tool for the consolidation of the effects of this transformation.

Dobrenko's attempt to apply Benjamin's critique of fascism's purely aesthetic nature to communism itself could only be valid, then, if it were proven that human nature inherently favors private property. A more nuanced de-economizing critique of built socialism, however, could be founded on the argument that socialist regimes did not, in fact, transform property relations in the societies they governed. Numerous scholars have pointed to the incomplete nature of the proprietorial transformations undergone by the Soviet Union and other state socialist societies, among them Mark B. Smith (2010), Kimberly Zarecor (2011), Steve Harris (2013), Brigitte Le Normand (2014) and Christine Varga-Harris (2015), in works I will discuss presently. Nevertheless, it is clear from the extensive nature of the nationalizations and expropriations carried out throughout the Second World that a distinguishing characteristic of state socialism was the far-reaching, if not always comprehensive, nature of its attempt to transform property relations; as well as the extraordinary levels of urbanization and industrialization, which this transformation enabled, not to speak of the extraordinary level of coercion that underlay this transformation.

In contrast to authors like Kotkin, Buchli, Collier or Smith, the de-economizers make little room for acknowledging in their accounts the enormous scale of the economic and infrastructural transformation, which took place in Second World societies. The arguments of critics like Todorov and Dobrenko are, of course, exercises in polemic. Having lived under state socialism, these scholars are presumably aware that socialist highways and cities were not merely imaginary or illusory. The de-economizer's arguments are rooted in a post-Cold War moment, when any departure from a *laissez-faire* belief in private property seemed, to some, like a flight into fantasy. To prevent these end-of-history polemics from being

mistaken for empirical descriptions of reality, it helps to take them more literally than they were intended to be taken, and to respond with some figures: pertaining both to the level and pace of economic development in the Eastern Block countries, as well as to measures of the extent to which ownership of the means of production had shifted from private to collective.

In terms of urbanization, the Stalin period saw a progression from 18 percent urbanization in 1926, to 33 percent in 1939, and 48 percent in 1959 in the Russian part of the Soviet Union (Mawdsley 2003: 66). By 1989 the population was 73 percent urban, and this figure has remained more or less stable since then, in fact falling slightly. In Moscow itself, the Stalin-era and subsequent reconfigurations of the city were preceded by large-scale economic transformation (all urban landholdings were nationalized in 1918) and in the architectural and planning professions, whose work was collectivized in 1934.

Similarly fast-paced urbanization and property communalization figures can be presented for the non-Soviet satellite states of East Europe after 1945. For example, the share of Warsaw's land plots in public ownership was 4 percent in 1918, and merely 8 percent in 1935, one of the very lowest figures among the major European capitals (Nowakowski 1988). In 1945, however, the entirety of Warsaw's land surface was communalized on the strength of one decree in October 1945. In Poland as a whole, the urban population increased minimally from 24 percent in 1918, to little over 27 percent in 1939 (Trybuś 2012). After the foundation of the Polish People's Republic, however, the urban population increased to 42 percent by 1950, and to 62 percent by 1989. Following the fall of communism, it started to fall gradually, to a level of around 60 percent today.

In fact, post-socialist East Europe is the only region in the world where a consistent process of dis-urbanization is currently occurring. As comparative measurements of historic and projected urbanization trends demonstrate, East European urbanization competed with Latin America and the so-called "developed regions" in absolute terms, and far outstripped

the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, during almost the entire second half of the twentieth century.¹³ Around 1990, however, East Europe almost immediately became the only region in the world where urbanization practically stopped. In every other region, urbanization either remained steady or took off at a dramatic pace at around this time. It is not far-fetched to say that socialism made East Europe urban. And as socialism unravels so too does the urban character of East Europe.

State socialism collectivized property, industrialized economies and urbanized societies—with all of the violence these processes entailed. Dobrenko, meanwhile, contends that socialism's political economy is in fact its foundational aesthetic concoction, while Todorov claims that communism should be understood in terms of its political-aesthetics rather than its political-economics. In the context of a scholarly landscape riven by disciplinary and regional Chinese walls, it is all too easy for scholars of built socialism to accept these kinds of polemics at face value, and to evacuate from their analyses discussion of economic forces, in particular of property relations. Against this background, I would like to underline the imperative to view state socialist architecture and urbanism precisely according to the manner in which they were driven by political-economic imperatives: to replace the capitalist mode of production with socialism; and to create the appropriate physical, institutional and ideological superstructures to ensure the consolidation of this transformation. In place of Todorov's understanding of "political aesthetics" therefore, I use the phrase "economic aesthetics" when referring to the spatial or visual (superstructural) expression of an ultimately determinant political-economic foundation.

SOCIALIST URBANISM BEYOND FAILURE

A rapidly-expanding body of literature testifies in-depth to the many achievements and

enduring legacies of built socialism. When surveyed together, this literature evidences the enormous variety of aesthetic, spatial and ideological forms of Second World urbanism; and the varied types of relationships and dependencies, which link these forms and ideologies to corresponding proprietorial and political arrangements. Below I provide a sketch of some studies, which may form the nucleus for a non-failure-centric, comparative literature on state socialist architecture, urbanism and material culture.

My own considerations of built socialism's successes and economic-aesthetic interdependencies began to take shape in the course of ethnographic work on the gargantuan, aesthetically-spectacular Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw—a Stalinist skyscraper “gifted” to Warsaw by the Soviet Union in 1955.¹⁴ Once a widely detested reminder of Soviet domination, the Palace today inspires affection, fascination, and even “obsession” among Warsaw's inhabitants. It is an island of publicness in a city, whose fabric is becoming increasingly stratified and segmented, and huge chunks of whose public property are currently being given away for next-to-nothing—in an extremely chaotic, legally “fuzzy” process—to the descendants of pre-war landowners (or, very frequently, to property speculators who purchased restitution claims at knock-down rates).¹⁵ Despite numerous attempts to privatize it, the Palace, however, continues to function as exactly the sort of radically collective, multi-use building its designers intended it to be; as the city's “territorial and vital center of gravity,” in the words of Edmund Goldzamt (1956: 19), one of the key architectural theorists (and ideologues) of Stalin-era Poland.

The Palace is able to remain socialist in part because of the spectacular and far-reaching manner in which numerous elements of a socialist “economic aesthetic”—gigantic size, bombastic style, symmetrical layout and nodal positioning at the heart of the city's transport network and layout of communicational axes—were built into it. Together, these aesthetic features ensure that there is enough room within the building for the Palace's many public

functions—universities, libraries, theatres, concert venues, research institutes, municipal institutions, museums, and a vast Palace of Youth hosting a swimming pool, gymnasiums, art, drama and technology workshops—to be gathered together under one roof; and for the building to secure a prominent place in the city’s symbolic universe, as well as inspiring a mixture of awe and fascination among the city’s inhabitants. None of this bigness, multi-functionality, enormity nor collective use-value, however, would have come into being, had the land on which the Palace was built not been expropriated from its private owners by the Warsaw Land Use Decree of 1945; and had the construction of the Palace itself not been motivated by its designers’ and patrons’ mission to “revolutionarily transform the city” (Goldzamt 1956: 21)—a transformation, which the construction of the Palace was intended to consolidate.

Palatial monumentality, symmetry, centrality, and multi-functionality do not, of course, constitute the full range of aesthetic and spatial forms characteristic of state socialism, as a short walk around any *mikroraion* or dacha suburb in Moscow, Bucharest, or Prague would make clear. The Warsaw Palace is by no means a representative creation of socialist urbanism. Stalinist Socialist Realism, the style it represents, is not the only successful or enduring example of built “still-socialism,” which has proven itself capable of resisting the property-privatizing, spatially-stratifying pressures of the capitalist economy.

Three recent monographs, for example, emphasize the pervasive and substantively progressive character of the Soviet mass housing program during the late Stalin and Khrushchev years. Notwithstanding its many, well-documented and undeniable imperfections, the program was, writes Mark B. Smith, “one of the greatest social reforms of modern European history” (2010: 4), “an extraordinary achievement by determined people ... the red star in the elaborate social system of the post-Stalin age” (2010: 183). Much of Stephen Harris’ book (2013), by contrast, concentrates on failure—on the shortcomings and

corruptibility of the apartment waiting list system, or on the aleatory and sometimes arbitrary mechanisms by which the norms for square-meterage per person were established.

Nevertheless, Harris emphasizes that Khrushchev's mass housing system ought to be seen as a substantive Soviet answer to the "housing question," which welfare states across the world have spent much of the past two centuries attempting to resolve. In Harris' summary, "Khrushchev's mass housing campaign did more to prop up the system than undermine it.... Its successes bolstered the regime's legitimacy, while its shortcomings did little to encourage citizens to think seriously about alternatives" (ibid.: 306). Christine Varga-Harris' cultural historical account explicitly problematizes the idea that Soviet mass housing was a "brilliant failure" (2015: 1). Varga-Harris testifies to the extent to which many goals associated with the housing project did produce effects, which approximated their objectives: from the reconfiguration (if not the transformation) of Russian gender roles (ibid.: 81–106);¹⁶ to the creation of a *byt* (way of life) marked by a "distinctly socialist aesthetic" (ibid.: 7, 81–98); and the forging of a bona-fide "socialist contract" between the state and citizen-residents.

Kimberley Zarecor's architectural and political history of housing during socialist Czechoslovakia's first two decades demonstrates that far from being drab or monotonous, Czechoslovak prefabricated typified housing encompassed a variety of styles, shapes, scales and technologies: from highly decorative Stalinist Socialist Realism built in brick and stone (known as *Sorela* in Czech and Slovak), to pitched-roof country cottages as well as multi-story, flat-roofed, breezeblock or large-panel apartment blocks. Zarecor's book also presents an in-depth case study of Nová Ostrava (now Poruba), a Stalinist housing project built from prefabricated technology (and decorated with prefabricated ornamentation). Zarecor characterizes Poruba as "the most successful Czechoslovak response to socialist realism, with its wide boulevards, abundant green spaces, and monumental, yet humane, building scale." (ibid.: 115) Poruba was "an exemplary socialist realist housing development that succeeded

in creating “images” of the socialist future that were unlike anything the local people had seen before” (2011: 153).

Although Zarecor ultimately leaves the question of success or failure an open question (ibid.: 263), her description of Poruba functions as an especially strong counterpoint to failure-centric narratives, in its highlighting of the extent to which built “images” of the socialist future were far from being merely fantastical or illusory. Even the ornamental sculptural group on Poruba’s central archway—featuring miners in work clothes with their families, a bicycle and a union wreath—was a scene “not far from everyday life for the locals in the 1950s, as seen in a snapshot of a crew with their bicycles in front of the Dukla Mine in the same era” (ibid.: 161). Crucially, Zarecor’s theoretical narrative directly contradicts the arguments of Lefebvre and the de-economizers, emphasizing how architecture functioned as the link between society’s base and superstructure (ibid.: 176): “The socialist industrial city was the location of the economic base of Marxism-Leninism, and its residential and civic architecture was, therefore, part of its superstructure.... In its ability to project the “image” of the socialist future, architecture was also a physical manifestation of the success of the socialist system.”

The scrupulous work of architectural and design historians provides insight into the diversity, conceptual sophistication and global reach of built socialist modernity: through detailed studies of collective housing and community in Romanian post-war mass housing projects (Maxim 2010); of figures such as the Yugoslav architect Vjenceslav Richter (Kulić 2014) and of Yugoslav expo architecture during the 1950s and 1960s (Kulić 2012); of the postwar Polish neo-avant-garde (Stanek 2014); of East European socialist architects’ and planners’ impact on the cityscapes of the Global South (Stanek 2012; 2015);¹⁷ in a magisterial history of modern architecture in Russia, focused on the Soviet period, seeking to pinpoint not “what Soviet architecture prevented,” but “what it produced” (Anderson 2015:

13); of heterogeneous—and transnational—cultures and economies of design, domesticity and consumption in the Soviet Union and Poland during the second half of the twentieth century (Castillo 2008; 2010; Crowley and Reid 2010; Reid 2012; Crowley 2008; 2008b). Although Crowley's and Reid's texts frequently emphasize the manner in which designers and consumers cultivated agentic creativity *despite* or *in opposition to* strictures imposed on them from above, they also paint a picture of the communist period as a time of cultural buoyancy and determined striving for modernity.

Analogously, recent books on the Polish and Hungarian Stalin-era new towns of Nowa Huta and Dunaújváros by historian Katherine Lebow (2013) and anthropologist Krisztina Fehérváry (2013); of the design of New Belgrade, the flagship planning project of Tito's Yugoslavia (Le Normand 2014); and an extensive, comparative study of architecture and post-war state formation in Hungary and the German Democratic Republic by Virág Molnár (2013), can be cited as works, which—although framed to some extent according to the conventions of the “built socialism failed” school—also present powerful counter-narratives. On one hand, for example, Fehérváry places her book within a lineage of anthropological research, which “continuously demonstrates that human beings are rarely transformed by material forms according to the intentions of architects or designers. People confound attempts to change their behavior or forms of sociality unless they are willing participants.” (2013: 13). On the other, her work provides the most systematic and theoretically sophisticated interrogation to date of the manner in which particular aesthetic qualities, such as “grayness” or “bleakness,” become associated with state socialism: not only by scholarly or outside observers, but also by the inhabitants of state socialist built environments themselves (Fehérváry 2009, 2013).

Studies not directly concerned with architecture and design history, too, have added new layers to our understanding of the manner in which built socialism was, and continues to be,

lived. Anthropologist Stef Jansen (2014; 2015) demonstrates how the inhabitants of a wartime Sarajevo apartment bloc purposefully reproduced the modernist, “gridded” structures of the disintegrated socialist state in multiple dimensions of their everyday lives.¹⁸ Ethnographers of memory and nostalgia have elucidated how state socialism’s “inheritances,” “legacies” or “afterlives”—as embodied in everyday household items, absent or present architectural forms—possess a capacity to contest, unsettle or co-constitute the ideological, symbolic and economic parameters of the post-socialist everyday (Bach 2015; 2017).¹⁹ Geographers Kiril Stanilov (2007) and Sonia Hirt (2013; 2014) have documented the extent to which socialist cities were supplied with open public and green space; and the dramatic pace with which this publicness is being, in Hirt’s phrase, “lost in transition”—replaced by commercial developments and fenced-off gated communities; while anthropologist Felix Ringel (2015) has theorized everyday life—and emerging narratives of hope—among the depopulating prefabricated panel blocks (*Plattenbau*) in the shrinking eastern German city of Hoyerswerda. Of particular significance to my argument in this paper is the work that scholars from across several disciplines—anthropologists, sociologists, legal theorists—have begun to compile on how the communalization of urban property—and its restitution or “re-privatization” after the fall of the communist regimes during 1989-1991—affects the social lives and ideological predilections of urban dwellers, as well as the aesthetic, spatial and affective dimensions of architectural and urban fabrics (Zerilli 2005; Chelcea 2003; 2006; Smith 2010; Kusiak 2012; Gorczyńska 2015; Murawski n.d. ; Chelcea and Druta 2016; Bouzarovski, Sykora, and Matoušek 2016).²⁰

Dissolving or Reconstituting the Socialist City?

Scholars working across disciplines, focusing on diverse regions and epochs, have provided

many exemplary debunkings, then, of myths about the backwardness, provinciality, monochromy or abject totalitarian subjecthood plaguing Second World urban lives and landscapes. A tremendous effort has been made, moreover, to counter ideologically-inflected ideas about the aesthetic, morphological or cultural exceptionalism of East European cities, and to account instead for their complexity and heterogeneity. As Vladimir Kulić observes in a review of several recent volumes, current scholarship on socialist cities accounts vividly not only for diversity, but also for the multiple convergences between the urbanity of the state socialist Second World and that of the capitalist First and Third worlds.²¹ In Kulić's words (2016: 15), "both the diachronic dynamism and the regional differences in urban development pose the question of whether such a thing as the "Eastern bloc city" existed at all as a single model. ... the mirage of a monolithic "Eastern bloc city" dissolves into a multitude of specific phenomena that, at closer scrutiny, were not entirely unique to the socialist world." What has arguably been done less successfully so far, however, is a systematic accounting of what the socialist city *was* rather than *was not*. Not only a "dissolution" of the "Eastern bloc" city, in other words, but an attempt to *reconstitute*—in terms which go beyond the old invocations of "bleakness" or "monotony"—of what was (or is) distinctive about state socialist urbanism.

Some steps have been taken, however, in the direction of a scholarship focused on determining socialism's specificity. Geographer Sonia Hirt (2013), for example—updating sociologist Ivan Szelenyi's theory of socialist "underurbanization"—loosely identifies several key traits: visual monotony, compactness, grand scale of public projects, over-supply of industrial and under-supply of commercial functions and an absence of key built forms typical of capital cities (such as squatter settlements and upscale suburbs). A sweeping but learned work by Owen Hatherley, meanwhile, opens with a critique of the "conventional wisdom" that the communist regimes "failed wholly and utterly" to create a new kind of

architecture. The point of departure Hatherley sets in his book is to “for the distinctive spaces that a non-capitalist society made which a profit-driven society could not” (2015: 31). Hatherley’s investigation produces a typology of eight “landscapes of communism,” or spaces, which were in some way specific to the state socialist urban and architectural project: *Magistrale* (broad boulevards); *Mikroraion* (self-contained residential city districts); Social Condenser (multi-functional public buildings, such as workers’ clubs); High Building (surrounded by empty space, as opposed to the profit-motivated capitalist skyscraper); Metro (grand as opposed to bland underground worlds); Reconstruction (post-war rebuilding driven by ideological and aesthetic, rather than commercial motivations); and Memorial (a saturation of urban space with mnemonic statuary). Historian Richard Anderson also aims to shed light on the manner in which Soviet architecture differed from that of the “capitalist worlds: first or third; developed or developing; north or south” (2015: 13). Although he does not explicitly spell out what this distinction consists of, he weans out several core preponderances, among these being an imperative towards integrated totality and a commitment to the restructuring of social relations through architecture. Introducing a recent volume of essays on Second World urbanity, meanwhile, Daria Bocharnikova and Steven Harris have called for a comparative approach which views the Second World’s built environment as a “socio-spatial system that differed markedly from the socio-spatial organization of cities in the capitalist west” (2017: 4). Among the shared characteristics of that Second World socio-spatial system—understood in geopolitical terms, as well with reference to the city itself—Bocharnikova and Harris identify “Marxist-Leninist ideology, one-party governance, planned economies, intrabloc trading and military alliances, and a commitment to sparking more socialist revolutions” (ibid.: 2).

Among the contributors to the Second World urbanism project, Kimberley Zarecor produces the most systematic attempt to arrive at something like a theorization of socialist

singularity.²² Zarecor's conceptualization hinges on two co-dependent concepts: "infrastructural thinking," and its mode of implementation, "the socialist scaffold" (both of these terms implicitly resonating with the Marxian architectonic distinction between *Basis* and *Überbau*). Infrastructural thinking, or "decision-making propelled by the requirements and scale of urban infrastructure" (2017: 5) is a feature of high modernist planning and urbanism everywhere, Zarecor admits. But—because of the legal, technical, institutional and economic resources at socialist planners' disposal (primarily nationalized land and a non-existent or limited real estate market), but also because of the totalizing political-ideological social transformative project which socialist urbanism was written into—nowhere else did infrastructurally driven urban transformations go so far as they did in the socialist world. Infrastructural thinking was enabled, in turn, by the "socialist scaffold" at its disposal—the "integrated system of parts"—tangible as well as institutional, from public transport and utilities networks to state-run cultural institutions—which comprised the totality of the socialist project.

As numerous observers have noted, this tendency toward integration and totality expressed itself in an almost fractal fashion, and on numerous levels of urban life.²³ Mark B. Smith, also cited by Zarecor, argues that, ultimately, the distinguishing characteristic of the Soviet mass-housing program—the factor, which made it truly unique on a global scale—was not even its scale or scope, expressed quantitatively in terms of number of units built or people housed, but the remarkable extent to which the entirety of socialist society came together in prefabricated housing blocks (2010: 117): "Unlike the increasingly troubled council estates of Britain or the housing projects of the United States, all kinds of people lived in Soviet microdistricts.... One way or another, and increasingly as the Khrushchev era gave way to the next two decades, very large sections of the population, including parts of the top elite, spent a part of their lives in these places." On the level of public rather than

residential architecture, I identify a similar sort of holistic integration and tendency towards comprehensiveness (*kompleksnost'* in Russian, *kompleksowość* in Polish) as being characteristics of both the design ideology and *longue durée* lived experience of Warsaw's Palace of Culture. The social life of the Palace, I argue, embodies a positive connection between the Stalinist desire to distribute the Palace's "architectural power ... throughout the city as a whole" (Goldzamt, cited in Sigalin 1986: 425) and the contemporary notion that twenty-first-century Warsaw is under the spell of a "Palace Complex"—an inability to come up with an adequate solution to the "dominance" of the Palace over Warsaw's cityscape and its presence in multiple domains of its everyday life (Murawski 2013, 2017b, n.d.b).

Emic Specificity, Emic Typology

The socialist city itself—its theoreticians, ideologists, architects, planners and lay inhabitants—produced myriad "emic" or "vernacular" definitions of specificity. Among the earliest of these is the Constructivist idea of the "social condenser," developed in the 1920s by avant-garde architects and theorists—chief among them Moisei Ginzburg and Ivan Leonidov—as a concept to mark the distinction between revolutionary and pre-revolutionary and capitalist architecture; and to delineate the way in which architecture at all scales—from the design of dwelling and public buildings to the planning of the city as a whole—could be deployed as a machine or conduit for the forging of radical new forms of social collectivity. Framing a recent collection of essays and translations devoted to the social condenser, architectural historian Jane Rendell and myself have argued in favor of "un-anchoring" this term from its origins in the Soviet 1920s, and deploying it to make sense of radical spatial and architectural projects both within and without the Second World (Murawski 2017a, Murawski and Rendell 2017). Thus, contributors make use of the social condenser to theorize

the design intentions, long-term social effects, successes and failures—and shifting political-economic foundations—of projects ranging from the Narkomfin Communal House (Buchli 2017; Charley 2017) and workers' clubs in 1920s–1930s Moscow (Bokov 2017); Warsaw's Palace of Culture (Murawski 2017b); the intellectual and spatial “explosion” which produced the New Left in 1960s London (Beech 2017); Henri Lefebvre and heterodox spatial thought in 1960s France (Stanek 2017); under-decline and corporatized public arts centers (Phillips 2017) and under-demolition high-modernist council estates in late capitalist Britain (Rendell 2017). In the case of London's Heygate Estate, housing is expropriated from its inhabitants by the municipality itself by means of a “Compulsory Purchase Order” (the U.K. equivalent of the U.S. “Eminent Domain” mechanism), according to the twisted reasoning that increasing the market value of land constitutes “public interest” (Rendell 2017). The “social condenser,” then, is one of many emic definitions, through the prism of which the specificity of socialist space can be explored and understood in a comparative, global “economic-aesthetic” framework.

Beyond the objective to define or delineate its specificity, built socialism was also driven, at its very core, by a classificatory or typological ambition. As Phillip Meuser and Dimitrij Zadorin demonstrate with reference to post-war mass housing, Soviet modernity was a project existentially invested in the goal of achieving a maximal extent of serialization and prefabrication; and in the classification of the “series” it produced into a universally intelligible typologization system. Nevertheless, serialization in the USSR was subject to constant change over time and modification into intricate arrays of sub-types, whether dictated by technological or planning shifts, or by the geographical or climatic features of particular construction contexts (earthquake zones, sub-tropical or arctic regions). In effect, no single directory of serialized construction was ever compiled—despite a bold attempt in the 1970s to create and roll out a “Unified Catalogue,” which received the 1978 Lenin Prize

in recognition of its efforts (Ibid.: 375–77).

The intricate proliferation of types and sub-types meant that mass housing across the Soviet Union (and elsewhere in the Second World) was, despite the appearance of monotony, in fact, substantively diverse. Even the matter of identifying the series number of the housing blocks depicted in *Irony of Fate* is, as Zadorin puts it, “both an easy and difficult question,” characterized by the constant swing between monotony and diversity, totality and fragmentariness.²⁴ It is easy enough to pinpoint the filming location for both the Moscow and Leningrad blocks to a *mikroraion* in the Troparevo district of southwest Moscow; and even to narrow it down to one of three buildings: Prospekt Vernadksogo 113, 119, or 125. However, “since the three are identical,” it is impossible to tell exactly which one of the three buildings was used. Moreover, it is difficult to identify the correct series index for the three buildings—most likely an experimental cluster, which preceded the third-generation P series (1972–), of which Meuser and Zadorin’s book identifies P-44 (produced by the Moscow House Factory (DSK) No. 1 until sometime around the year 2000) as a particularly illustrative specimen, “the most popular and likely the most famous series to be built in the capital” (2015: 375). Among the P-44’s predecessors (built not only at DSK-1 Moscow, but also at numerous house factories throughout the USSR) is the second generation II-49; which is, in turn, “sibling” of the I-464A, which—together with I-464D—“accounted for more than half of annual large-panel housing stock production in the entire Soviet Union” during 1963–1971 (the period encompassed by the “Second Generation” of industrial housing construction). Both of these wildly popular Second Generation series were, in fact, offspring of the first generation I-464 (1958–1964), “without a doubt ... the most widespread industrial series in Soviet mass housing,” produced at over two hundred DSKs and “erected across the Soviet Union, literally from Brest to Vladivostok” (ibid.: 193)—and exported, in adapted regional variants, to places as far afield as Cuba and Chile (ibid.: 33). Indeed, “Right up to the present,

large numbers of plants” in the former USSR—some now privatized, others still in public ownership—are continuing to manufacture building systems, which are “distant offspring of the original I-464” (ibid.: 272).

Somewhere herein, then, lies the paradox (or irony) of Soviet mass housing and serialized construction. Meuser and Zadorin vividly illustrate the fact that, on one hand, there may not have been any two neighborhoods or blocks built in *exactly* the same way; but that, on the other hand, a remarkable quantity and spread of neighborhoods and buildings were built in *almost exactly* the same way, to the point of practical indistinguishability, even to the expert eye. Soviet prefabricated mass housing was, to use planner and researcher Kuba Snopek’s term, a ‘radically generic’ terrain (2013: 107), of tedium and of intensity, boredom and excitement, hegemony and difference.²⁵ Its spaces may have engendered ennui and alienation from one’s neighbors; but they were also *and are still*—as *Irony of Fate* depicts—sites of collectivity, togetherness, adventure, serendipitous love—and sepia-tinged Soviet nostalgia. As the Moscow protests of 2017 have demonstrated, moreover—held in opposition to the municipality’s realtor-friendly, politically-divisive plan to demolish over four thousand inner city Khrushchev-era blocks housing more than one million people, most of them of modest means—they are also sites of intense class-based contestation and conflict. The demolition zones of Khrushchev-era Moscow are also sites of extreme proprietorial ambiguity—ownership and/or lease of flats, whole buildings and the land itself is divided up in an intricate patchwork of co-dependence between residents (and residents’ committees), developers and the municipal authorities; a type of ambiguity, which, as local commentators explain, inevitably favors the interests of the capital-rich. As one Moscow architect told me, “this so-called renovation program could have been an opportunity to fix the institution of property ownership in Russia; but it has, in fact, only made it worse.”

CONCLUSION: PEERING INTO THE EMIC TAUTOLOGY OF PROPERTY

Perhaps the best-known among emic definitions of socialist urbanism is the oft-cited 1934 Lazar Kaganovich tautology, which infamously shut down avant-garde debates about the relationship between architecture, urbanism and the creation of a new socialist way of life (*byt*), claiming that any city in a socialist country is socialist by definition: “People who insist that we must build “the socialist city” forget a trifling point. That from the socio-political point of view, the cities of the USSR are already socialist cities. Our city became socialist from the moment of the October Revolution, when we expropriated the bourgeoisie, and when we socialized the means of production.”²⁶ As the literature frequently testifies, Soviet architectural debates and publications were, throughout the decades of the Soviet Union’s existence, peppered with numerous—more or less Kaganovichesque—statements demarcating the specificity of Soviet urbanism. In the words of one participant in a 1964 debate among Soviet architects (cited in Meuser and Zadorin 2016: 145): “The socialist city is based upon a completely different set of laws: namely class equality in Soviet society; the absence of exploitation and unemployment; elimination of private ownership of land, a system of state-planned economy and demand for the best living conditions for the masses.... Socialism has completely changed life in the cities.”

In his book on the twentieth-century fate of Moscow’s Arbat district, meanwhile, historian Stephen Bittner unearths a characterization made by Soviet architectural grandee Mikhail Posokhin during a 1961 Moscow architects’ conference. By means of negative invocations of Los Angeles, Paris, and London, Posokhin “maintained that the fundamental characteristic of Soviet architecture was a state monopoly on development” (Bittner 2008: 125). This delineation, Bittner suggests, is curious, because it “hinges only on the planning process and not on any peculiarities manifested in built structures” (*ibid.*). By the 1960s, Bittner argues, Soviet architects’ ideas about Sovietness boiled down to the state monopoly

on planning, rather than “on the more essential distinctions spawned by the new life” (ibid.: 139). Soviet architecture was being defined as Soviet “by location rather than by essence” (ibid).

I suggest, however, that “the particularities manifested in built structures”—in other words, their aesthetic, spatial or morphological characteristics—are not necessarily any more “essential” than the relationship to the means of production that these particularities are co-constituted by. However normative, performative, mystical, ideological or tautological the definitions and classification systems produced by Second World planners and architects may appear, it is instructive to peer into and learn from these emic concepts, and to deploy them as a basis for scholarly analysis; and to comprehend these concepts on their own terms—in terms of the effect they had on the built environments, its dwellers and users; and in terms of how far they do or do not continue to endure today. The questions these vernacular conceptions raise can be foregrounded as starting points for comparative explorations into the actually-existing specificity of (successful) socialist urbanism. Furthermore, as the example of the social condenser demonstrates, these vernacular Second World concepts can be deployed to think through the experience of global urbanism more broadly. As Douglas Rogers, Zsuzsa Gille, Don Kalb and other scholars have recently pointed out, so far scholars have tended to explain the Second World (or the “Global East”) through categories imported from the West. It ought not be too much of a leap of faith, however, to attempt to understand the experience of global architectural and urban modernity through the prism of that part of the world where, arguably, that modernity witnessed its furthest-reaching and most radical realization.²⁷

As anthropologist Anna Kruglova has pointed out (2017), Soviet and post-Soviet societies practice and articulate various forms of “vernacular Marxism” in their everyday lives. These everyday Marxisms bear a strong connection to “official” or “canonical” Soviet

Marxism-Leninism (which is, of course, itself a vernacular Marxism of sorts) but are adapted and modified further by their users. Similarly, the vernacular urban Marxisms of Soviet Constructivism, Yugoslav Self-Management or Czechoslovak *Sorela* all bear meandering but discernible traces of connection to foundational Marxian ideas about materialism and the city, about the social function of property, and the relationship between *Basis* and *Überbau*.

If, as Marx claims, property relations constitute the most direct superstructural expression of the reigning relations of production (1970: 11), it would hardly seem controversial to suppose that property ownership arrangements exert an important—perhaps foundational—impact on architecture and urbanism: on its shape, style and scale, on its social effects and on the manner of its disintegration or endurance. Whether or not we accept this premise, a renewed comparative emphasis on the manner in which property arrangements feed into urban life—in spatial, aesthetic and affective terms, as well as legal or commercial ones; and on how shifting forms of property were and continue to be understood, puzzled over and modified by Second World city-dwellers—may produce a more systematic picture not only of how socialist urbanism imploded, but also of what it achieved; and not only of how socialist cities differed from each other, but also of what they had in common.

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Acknowledgments: This article has benefited from the insight and critique of numerous friends and colleagues, among them Jonathan Bach, Masha Mileeva, Alexander Kentikelenis and Giovanni Menegalle; from participants at the Second World Urbanity conference in Lviv, organized by Dasha Bocharnikova, Steve Harris, Sofia Dyak and Myroslava Shlapak (August 2017); and at the “New Histories and Ethnographies of the Socialist City” panel at the ASEES Convention in Chicago, organised by Kimberley Zarecor and Zayra Badillo Castro (November 2017). My argument was rendered stronger and more credible in large part thanks to the formidable level of scrutiny and engagement provided by the the anonymous *CSSH* reviewers, as well as the journal’s co-editor Geneviève Zubrzycki. My research was supported by a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship (ECF-2016-665) held at Queen Mary, University of London; and an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship, held at the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies, University College London.

¹ These analyses of socialist failure overlap with critiques of “high modernist” architecture and planning, whether in Brasilia, Chandigarh, Paris, Maastricht or Astana (Holston 1989; Latour 1996; Scott 1999; Hommels 2005; Abram and Weszkalnys 2013; Laszczkowski 2016).

² In particular, I refer to theorists such as Mol (2002), DeLanda (2006), Latour (2005), Bennett (2010), and Thrift (2008), who retain a post-structuralist focus on superfluity and complexity, but emphasize “non-representational” registers (Thrift 2008), such as the materiality of things or bodily affects, over language and discourse. Due to this emphasis on materiality, these theorists have had a strong influence on architecture and urbanism scholars.

³ I allude here to Alexei Yurchak’s (2005) work on discursive “hypernormalization” under late socialism. I am indebted to Christina Schwenkel, who expressed surprise—upon hearing

a previous version of this paper—at being identified with “failure-centrism”—a discourse which, she said, her work aims to problematize rather than to consolidate.

⁴ My argument here parallels Anna Krylova’s (2014) critique of the “master narrative of stagnation” running through Kotkin’s presentation of Soviet modernity. I am grateful to Tom Cinq-Mars for pointing this out.

⁵ The usage of the term “Second World” to signal a global interpretation of socialist urbanism—and its specificities—is promoted by the Second World Urbanity network (Bocharnikova and Harris 2017).

⁶ For a commentary on Lefebvre’s understanding of state socialist urbanism, see Stanek (2011: 63–68); and for analysis of Lefebvre’s interest in Yugoslav self-management, Stanek (*ibid.*: 233–44).

⁷ The notion of state socialist urbanism’s “specificity” has also recently been invoked by Daria Bocharnikova and Steven Harris (2017) and Marie-Alice L’Hereux (2015: 297–98), in the latter case with explicit reference to Lefebvre.

⁸ I do not engage in detail here with debates about the validity of the term “post-socialism” (Humphrey 2002; Ferenčuhová and Gentile 2016). My position is that postsocialism remains a generative term and ought to be retained; and that it is productive to analyze the broader world through categories derived from the East European experience. “Postsocialism” can be combined with supplementary categories, such as “still-socialism” or “zombie socialism” (Chelcea and Druta 2016), which capture different facets of how socialist modernity continues to affect the global present.

⁹ For a recent take on the politics and ethics of the distinction between “emic” (internal, informant-derived descriptive categories) and “etic” (external, objective) categories, see Ortner (2016). For an exploration of “vernacular Marxism” in the USSR, see Kruglova

(2017).

¹⁰ This view overlaps with analyses by sociologists and geographers, among them Szelenyi's notion of "underurbanization" (Andrusz, Harloe, and Szelenyi 1996); as well as French and Hamilton (1979). See also recent work on post-Soviet "monotowns" (Crowley 2015; Morris 2016).

¹¹ Western Marxist accounts of state socialism (and the state socialist city) tended to argue that state socialism was not, in fact, Marxist at all (Lewin 1985), hence the origin of the ironic notion of "actually-existing" socialism. See also the debate between Tatjana Thelen (2011a, 2011b), Katherine Verdery and Elizabeth Dunn (2011), in which the former author accuses the latter two of reducing their analyses of (post)socialism to economic categories.

¹² See, for example, Schlögel 1993; Buck-Morss 2000; Groys 2008; Boym 2010; Paperny 2006; 2010; Chibireva 2005; Akinsha, Kozlov, and Hochfeld 2014; Zarecor 2017.

¹³ For an analysis of growth and decline patterns in East European cities, see Mykhnenko and Turok (2008).

¹⁴ The most extensive account is provided in my monograph of the Warsaw Palace, Murawski (n.d.b).

¹⁵ Katherine Verdery (2003) has theorized "fuzzy property" in rural Romania. For an examination of the coercive effects of fuzzy property in post-socialist Warsaw, see Murawski (2018).

¹⁶ Lynne Attwood (2010) has provided an in-depth social history of gendered domesticity in Soviet Russia, with extensive reference to the mass housing program.

¹⁷ Contributors to Raman and West (2010) provide a global, anthropological perspective on socialism's "endurances."

¹⁸ Ethnographic works on the state during and after socialism are also pertinent here, even

if they do not deal directly with the city. Among these are Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov's ethnohistory of the Evenki of subarctic Siberia (2003); Madeleine Reeves (2014) on the affective life of the state in the central Asian borderlands; Alaina Lemon's (2009) emic exploration of "sympathy" for the (Soviet and Putinist) state in 21st century Moscow.

¹⁹ Phillip Meuser and Bart Goldhoorn's notion of "capitalist realism" (2006) theorizes mutations of Socialist Realist aesthetics and Soviet management practices after 1991.

²⁰ Many of these authors are directly informed by Verdery's work on "fuzzy property" (2004); and by David Stark's (1996) concept of "recombinant" East European capitalism and path dependency.

²¹ Three recent *East-West Central* volumes (Moravánszky and Hopfengärtner 2016, Moravánszky and Kegler 2016, Moravánszky and Lange 2016) are explicitly devoted to examining continuities and collaborations co-constituting post-war European modernity (and post-modernity) on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

²² See also Christina Crawford's (2017) theorization of the link between socialist spatiality and standardization, from the scale of tractor production to city planning.

²³ Boris Groys' presentation of Soviet civilization as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, albeit aestheticizing, provides the best-known example of this sort of argumentation (Groys 1992).

²⁴ Zadorin, personal communication 2017

²⁵ Snopek's term is formulated with reference to the Moscow mikroraion Belayevo, which, he argued, ought to be entered into the UNESCO World Heritage List.

²⁶ For example, Colton 1998; Buchli 2000; Attwood 2010; DeHaan 2013. Collier, however, recognizes some of the specificity contained within this tautology (2011: 75).

²⁷ Rogers 2010. Don Kalb proposed the notion of "theory from the east" at the November 2015 American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting. These ideas—as well as those

explored by the Second World Urbanity network—are part of a new wave of engagement by scholars of East Europe, Russia and the Second World with post-colonial theory.