

# Second World Urbanity: Infrastructures of Utopia and Really Existing Socialism

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## Abstract

The disappearance of most state socialist regimes in 1989/1991 afforded scholars from a range of disciplines new opportunities to examine the history of socialist cities and their post-socialist transformations. Recent scholarship has focused particularly on such cities in their corresponding national contexts and with the passing of the Cold War, broader commonalities with the urban history of Western cities have come into sharper focus. Absent in most recent work on socialist cities, however, is attention to the broader ideological, political, and cultural world—the socialist Second World—that bound these cities and their countries together. Similarly lacking is a deeper appreciation of the specificities of the socialist city in contrast to its counterparts in the capitalist West and the global South. Read together, the essays in this special collection underscore the value of re-examining how socialist cities were once part of the myriad relations that gave the Second World its ideological and material coherence in pursuit of socialist urbanity.

## Keywords

Second World, socialism, urbanity, socialist city, state socialism, urban history

In the past 100 years, urbanization has become simultaneously the chief engine and consequence of modernization. Most people across the globe have come to live in cities, bringing along with them the basic human activities of production, consumption, and circulation, which bind cities together no matter their location. In addition to steadily losing its population, the countryside has enjoyed or been subjected to the social and cultural forces of urban life ranging from diminishing family sizes and electricity to paved roads and the Internet. Certain cities in the global North—such as London, Paris, and New York—have traditionally served as the chief historical examples for how urbanization came about. And they continue to be seen as models for countries aspiring to urbanity. At the same time, megacities of the global South—such as Mumbai, Mexico City,

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and Nairobi—gain more visibility as powerful counterexamples of urbanization and modernization conceived in Western terms.

Lost between the Eurocentric version of urban history and its postcolonial critique is the recent past of the Second World. “We continually find the First World in the Third, the Third in the First, and the Second nowhere at all,” the philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri observe.<sup>1</sup> The socialist legacy of the Second World and what it means for urban historians more generally have only been harder to grasp the farther we get from the collapse of state socialism in 1989/1991. Scholars working on specific socialist countries have lost sight of the broader socialist world and have increasingly failed to communicate its relevance for urban historians working on other regions of the world. This special issue of the *Journal of Urban History* seeks to refocus the scholarly attention of specialists and nonspecialists on the seventy years of diverse experiments in urbanization that socialist countries pursued beginning with the experimental projects of Soviet architects and urban planners in the 1920s and ending with the fragmentation of the socialist Second World during and beyond the revolutions of 1989 and 1991.

As the world’s first successful socialist regime, the Soviet Union pioneered experiments in forging a socialist, urban way of life during the interwar years. Its Eastern European satellite states renewed their own efforts to build urban modernity after World War II, often ignoring Soviet blueprints. Over the next four decades, socialist regimes and revolutionary movements arose throughout the world, constituting a distinct bloc of countries characterized by a shared allegiance to Marxist–Leninist ideology, one-party governance, planned economies, intrabloc trading and military alliances, and a commitment to sparking more socialist revolutions. Recalling these fundamental features of socialist regimes helps us recapture the specificities of socialist cities in contrast to their Western counterparts.

To be sure, the Second World was not without its internal divisions as the Soviet Union soon discovered in its relations with Yugoslavia and China. Under the broad banner of Marxism–Leninism, competing visions of communism emerged and found their expression in the architecture and planning of cities, as well as the everyday lives of their inhabitants. Although most socialist regimes fully embraced the city over the countryside in searching for communism’s most appropriate sociospatial model, some looked to rural life as a template for reshaping cities anew.<sup>2</sup>

The disappearance of the Second World from the political map has had profound effects on academic studies of its cities. For a generation now, historians have enjoyed unprecedented access to archives and social scientists have conducted field work unimaginable before 1989. Mirroring the newfound autonomy of nation-states breaking from the former socialist bloc, much of this new scholarship has focused on the past and present of cities in individual countries.<sup>3</sup> This is to be expected for scholars who study cities in their contemporary circumstances and their very recent pasts given the very different trajectories that, say, North Korea and Estonia have taken since 1991. For historians, however, what has been lost in the turn toward national histories of the socialist city is awareness of the ideological, political, and material interconnectedness of the former socialist bloc.<sup>4</sup>

This blind spot is evident among urban historians more generally for whom the Second World and its internal diversity and many interconnections have become increasingly invisible. For scholars outside the field, the history of the socialist city remains all too often a story of failed utopian visions from the 1920s, followed by the bizarre socialist realist monumentalism of Stalinism, and ending in an undifferentiated collection of drab and gray concrete mass housing. The inhabitants of the socialist city lived in this final petrified stasis only to be awakened after 1989/1991 to the forces of neoliberalism and late capitalism, and the concomitant cultural manifestations of postmodernism. Only relatively recently has the rise of global history spurred interest in studying more closely the entanglements and interconnections of urban histories across Eastern and Western Europe, the global North and South.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the specificities of

socialist cities and their role in shaping what was the Second World remain little understood in the broader field of urban history.

The articles in the following collection advance a more complex history of socialist cities by highlighting themes that have heretofore received little scholarly attention. These include the postcolonial condition of socialist cities in newly decolonized states (Christian Hess); rethinking the socialist period of such cities as a distinct, compressed phase in an overall trajectory of industrialization (Kimberly Zarecor); the adaptation and rebranding of Western (often American) urban design into socialist forms of urbanization (Christina Crawford); the socialist city as a site of resurging nationalism and artistic experimentation (Ivana Bago); using the urban environment to change the behaviors and worldviews of inhabitants (Annemarie Sammartino); and the repurposing of socialist-era infrastructures for postsocialist economies (Kimberly Zarecor). Taken together, these themes point to a central argument of our project, namely, that cities of the Second World suggest a much more fruitful and accurate model than the one presented by New York, London, and Paris for understanding how most societies presently undertake and experience urbanization. In short, we contend that the path to urbanization that most countries undertake today bears a greater resemblance to the rapid, top-down urbanization drives of the socialist city.

The present state of scholarship calls for renewed attention to the specificities of the socialist experience for students of both contemporary global urbanization and the socialist past. During the Cold War, such a focus contributed to the demonization of the socialist other as a deformed and illegitimate version of modernity that was doomed to fail since it was not based on the pillars of liberal democracy, rule of law, and a market economy. Since 1991, scholarship on socialist cities has pointed to the similarities and parallels between the socialist path to modernity and its Western, capitalist counterpart. By eschewing the Cold War paradigm of fundamental differences, this scholarship emphasizes the transnational links and influences that made Gary, Indiana, and Magnitogorsk or Richland, Washington, and Ozersk, Chelyabinsk Oblast part of a remarkably common, modern story whose intellectual origins can be traced back to the eighteenth century Enlightenment.<sup>6</sup>

Without denying these mutual influences and entangled trajectories, our project aims in its present stage at recapturing what made socialist cities distinct from their counterparts in the West in both their design and lived realities. A mass housing estate in southern Moscow may look outwardly like public housing on Chicago's south side—with both tracing their origins to the International Style and the Athens Charter—but such similarities in outward appearance fail to capture fundamental differences in planning typologies, property regimes, governance, and lived experience.<sup>7</sup>

It is for that purpose of pinpointing the specificity of the former socialist bloc and its modes of urban space production that we revive the term “Second World” and refashion it into a serious category of scholarly inquiry. Instead of reproducing the Cold War model of three worlds racing to modernity at different speeds, we inject new meanings into this capacious category through the kind of new research presented in this special issue.

We understand the Second World first and foremost as a place of *alterity*. Historically, socialism aspired to be an alternative, the successor to the hegemony of capitalism. The collapse of really existing socialism, which at times did not differ significantly from the imagined capitalist other, left the world in a paralyzed state incapable of imagining alternatives. The history of the Second World is thus a unique source for thinking through alternatives, not only insofar as the socialist experience of the twentieth century is concerned but more generally in the present.

We also see the Second World as an *in-between* place: trapped in-between the first and third worlds, in-between developed and developing economies, in-between socialist and capitalist utopias, and in-between colonial pasts and communist futures.<sup>8</sup> This entanglement between capitalism and socialism, the Western version of modernity and its socialist counterpart, makes the Second World a rather unique laboratory to study urbanization and modernization.

More recently, scholars of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have turned to the “Second World” as a useful category of analysis. For example, the editors of *Ab Imperio*—a Russian and English language journal in the humanities and social sciences based in Kazan—write,

At this point it should be absolutely clear that it is not the period (cc. 1945-1989) and the location (east of the Elbe River, north of the Himalayas) that set a society apart as the Second World. It is the social system—or at least the social imagery—that presents itself as an alternative subject of production of knowledge and public discourses about human historical processes, challenging the hegemony of the composite and multifaceted “Western” cultural and political model. Elements of this social system (or social imagery) can be located both before and after the conventional chronological boundaries of the Second World.<sup>9</sup>

Expanding upon this definition, we propose to read the built environment of the Second World as a *sociospatial system* that differed markedly from the sociospatial organization of cities in the capitalist West.

A first step, therefore, for understanding the Second World and its place in the world is to take stock of the different actors who produced, consumed, circulated within, and represented this built environment for internal and external audiences. These included high-ranking politicians, urban planners, and architects aspiring to radically reshape cities and societies. Essential for implementing designers’ plans were the factory bosses and local party members whose job it was to manage industrial growth, maintain urban infrastructure, and keep cities running on a daily basis. Tens of millions of ordinary urban citizens adjusted and subverted plans imposed from the top and generated their own meanings about the socialist spaces they inhabited and circulated in every day. And even visitors taking pictures of the Second World as touristic sites helped circulate images of its cities across borders, shaping what the rest of the world knew about the socialist other. Grasping who these actors were, how they were related to one another politically and socially, and what effects they had on the urban environment are critical questions for any study of the socialist city.

A second step is recognizing the role of ideology. Inventing the modern socialist city, envisioning the rational organization of its everyday life and economy, reshaping its physical and historical landscapes, and making vast numbers of people urban were the central preoccupations of state socialism. Moreover, they were informed by interpretations of Marxism–Leninism that foresaw the communist future as the realization of an industrial modernity that capitalism could only initiate. To be sure, such goals were also the preoccupations of modern governance in general, but in the Second World, they were taken especially seriously, enshrined in party programs, built into technical systems, and exercised on a larger scale without having to contend with the pressures of the private property regime.

The materiality of urban and rural landscapes at times resisted these ideological interventions, but were more often transformed by them. The practices of inhabitants were often violently molded and merged with new practices and urban forms. In turn, the idea of *novyi byt* (the new way of life) and a new understanding of the material world sought to eradicate the architecture of the *ancien regime*. But at the same time, the very infrastructure inherited by revolutionaries limited the implementation of their visions. The urban was thus the key theater of battle between new visions for the Second World and its preexisting foundations out of which would emerge a new subject and set of social relations.

To grasp this goal of socialist space production, as well as its inherent ambiguities, we speak about the Second World’s *urbanity*, which we define broadly as the process of becoming *urban* and *urbane*. We value the term’s connotation of the urbane, the sophisticated, and the cultured because remaking citizens in these ways was at the core of socialist visions in the Second World. Its citizens were likewise actively involved in defining the meaning of the urban and the urbane.

Urbanity also captures the planning and building of cities in their totality from showcase boulevards to the basic infrastructure of a mass housing estate's centralized heating system. In other words, we understand urbanity as the process of forging new subjectivities and finding adequate spatial arrangements for the individual and the collective.

The essays presented here constitute the first publication of our scholarly collective (<http://www.secondworldurbanity.org>), which brings together students of the socialist city from a variety of disciplines who examine socialist cities past and present through the frameworks of architecture, urban planning, and everyday life. The authors featured here presented papers at one of three scholarly conferences held in Washington, D.C., Tallinn, and St. Petersburg in 2014-2015. From its beginning, we have framed the Second World Urbanity project as a scholarly effort to stitch together a space increasingly fragmented by political and methodological nationalisms and to give a new visibility to the multiple visions of socialist urban modernity. Beyond purely academic goals, it is particularly instructive to turn our attention to the urban history of the Second World to grapple with growing inequalities on a global scale. It is urgent to learn to speak about a *differentiated* and *divided* even if highly *interconnected* world. A nuanced account of the Second World's history can help us work out such a language that is equally sensitive to difference and to international connections, to local specificities and common global aspirations.

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### Notes

1. As quoted by Nancy Condee, "From Emigration to e-Migration: Contemporaneity and the Second World," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 235.
2. See, for example, Emily Callaci, "'Chief Village in a Nation of Villages': History, Race and Authority in Tanzania's Dodoma Plan," *Urban History* 43, no. 1 (2016): 96-116.
3. For example, see Kimberly Elman Zarecor, *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945-1960* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011); Katherine Lebow, *Unfinished Utopia: Nowa Huta, Stalinism, and Polish Society, 1949-56* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Brigitte Le Normand, *Designing Tito's Capital: Urban Planning, Modernism, and Socialism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014).
4. A notable exception is Elidor Mëhilli, whose work explores economic and political ties across the Second World, including the transnational interactions of urban planners and architects. See, for example, Elidor Mëhilli, "The Socialist Design: Urban Dilemmas in Postwar Europe and the Soviet Union," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 635-65; Elidor Mëhilli, "Socialist Encounters: Albania and the Transnational Eastern Bloc in the 1950s," in *Cold War Crossings: International Travel and Exchange across the Soviet Bloc, 1940s-1960s*, ed. Patryk Babiracki and Kenyon Zimmer (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2014), 107-33.
5. See, for example, Emily Gunzburger Makas and Tanja Damljanovic Conley, eds., *Capital Cities in the Aftermath of Empires: Planning in Central and Southeastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2010);

- Mikael Hård and Thomas J. Misa, eds., *Urban Machinery: Inside Modern European Cities* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008); Jan C. Behrends and Martin Kohlrausch, eds., *Races to Modernity: Metropolitan Aspirations in Eastern Europe, 1890–1940* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014); Vladimir Kulic, Timothy Parker, and Monica Penick, eds., *Sanctioning Modernism: Architecture and the Making of Postwar Identities* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014). See also the research project East West Central (<https://moravanszky.arch.ethz.ch/research/east-west-central/information>) and the Global Urban History blog (<https://globalurbanhistory.com>).
6. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
  7. For a study that demonstrates the differences of mass housing on a global scale, see Florian Urban, *Tower and Slab: Histories of Global Mass Housing* (London: Routledge, 2012).
  8. In this regard, our project draws in particular on the case of Yugoslavia for understanding the position of the Second World more generally. See Vladimir Kulić and Maroje Mrduljas, *Modernism In-between: The Mediator Architecture of Socialist Yugoslavia*, photographs by Wolfgang Thaler (Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2012).
  9. “On the Second World, For the Last Time,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 4 (2011): 13.

### Author Biographies

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