

AGING MODERNISM: MATERIALITY AND CONSUMERISM IN EASTERN EUROPE

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The interpretation of physical aging in the built environment changes according to the cultural values attributed both to temporality and material expression in architecture. It is therefore incorrect to think of a permanent doctrine, a scientific definition or a "natural" process that defines the role of aging in architecture since it is a construct in continuous transformation. Even more problematic is the relation of marks of time in buildings with historical consciousness. Aging does not always signify defined events or periods: it is a hybrid process that mixes chemical moldering with human actions, some intentional, other resulting from non-deliberate long-term courses.

Contemporary capitalist culture accentuates the problematic relation of materiality and history since it is based on the consumption of continuously new representations—more usable than relational—that tend to substitute physical reality itself. At the beginning of the century Alois Riegl had understood the necessity of mediating between historical consciousness and modern information. In his fundamental essay "The Modern Cult of Monuments" of 1903 he formulated "The Quality of the Antique" attributing to visual signs of physical aging in buildings the role of signifiers capable of communicating a general impression of the past. "The Quality of the Antique" is well distinguished from the "historic quality" of a monument since it does not provide any specific documentary information on a style, period or event. Modern man does not have the capacity nor the time to analyze historic languages or exact precedents: with Riegl's "Antiquity" he contents himself with an overall manifestation of the passing of time that expresses more the contrast between old and new than a specific meaning. With this theoretical construct, Riegl was able to relativize the role of past models as standards and situated history in the shifting flux of contemporary mass psychology.

Riegl's "Antiquity" divorced material aging in buildings from its tie to the events that caused it: now the signs of time had become a deceptive mask that hid instead of documenting the continuity between past and present. History, reduced to a general overview of the already been and manifested by signs of decay, was polarized in radical opposition with Modernity who challenged time and located itself in the realm of the eternally new. The course of the twentieth century has both validated and at the same time drastically dismissed Riegl's assumptions. His expansion of the theories of the Picturesque on the role of ruins to give an impression of time has been expanded to a point where the past can now be manufactured: superficial signs of material aging have so effectively taken the role of historical markers that they can be employed as scenographic devices in movies and theme parks. On the other side the opposition between a timeless modern versus an aged historical built environment has

hardly held true. Modern structures, belonging to an age of continuous technological and ideological change, have been subject to a much faster physical and semantic obsolescence. In advanced capitalism anything is available to be used as marketable good and buildings have not been spared from this destiny. If there is one difference between ancient (read: belonging to a pre-capitalist culture) and modern aging, this deals with the obsession of total control of the past. While older buildings followed a gradual process of erosion and/or additions of recent portions with an almost geological stratification, the new are never allowed merely to molder. Everything in modernity must be scrapped, recycled, sanitized or mummified in that deadly version of the past called 'heritage', an artificial stopping of the clock of time as if nothing happened after a selected period. The western tendency to classify buildings as "Historic" (repository of established values and preserved in an aged image), "Modern" (continuously new and exploitable) and "Obsolete" (without functional or documentary value and deemed to be razed) ties irremediably materiality to direct usage and forced signification. Is material aging destined to be either manufactured or erased? If "Historical" is, after all, still opposed to "Modern," what is going to happen with the signs of time on the face of twentieth century buildings? Is their physical obsolescence deemed to forced disappearance? What about the non-intentional nature of aging, its residual uncontrollable character? Are there places in the contemporary world where the continuous re-definition of history could be measured against materiality, as if physical aging resisted signification?

There exists a context that is paradigmatic with relation to the role of physical aging in modernist structures: Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe. Here, frozen during fifty years of governmental immobility from 1945 to 1990, modern buildings have reached an advanced state of decay and have not undergone the process of continuous upgrading typical of market economies. This modernity fallen into ruins challenges our habit of reducing materiality and representation in architecture to usable formulas. The different marks and scars inscribed on modern buildings in Eastern Europe document the succession of political programs, modifications and erasures that characterize modern history in these countries. This is of particular relevance since each dominant ideology proposed a physical environment that attempted to replace the traces of the former ones rather than integrating with them. Sometimes governments succeeded in erasing the marks of previous periods but very often this was not feasible and they were forced to adapt buildings created by completely different premises. We nowadays witness a fragmented overlay of additions that characterizes the fabric of Eastern European cities. These places have recorded

disruptive political changes and still show their traces long after the ideas that have created certain buildings have disappeared. The outcome of these historic events testifies of a resistance of materiality to the ideological changes imposed on buildings by governments and occupants alike. Meaning is something that cannot be completely imposed on architecture but often emerges indirectly from the gap between original intentions and subsequent modifications and is carried more by material remnants than by new forms. The current "Westernization" of Eastern Europe has brought its cities and buildings to market economy and, in a further wave of cultural erasure, threatens to sweep away the signs of the period between 1945 and 1990. Structures are upgraded to Western standards and material layering erased. The recent past is giving way to another version of "Contemporaneity" or, in the case of older structures, to artificially preserved pieces of "Historic Heritage." The suspension of the Western 'march of progress' caused by fifty years of communist regime poses serious problems in adapting directly its structures to new uses. This problematic transition raises questions on the way materiality is consumed in our culture and the role of modern ruins as signifiers. We will present here two case studies belonging to two distinct categories: the architecture erected before 1945 and undergoing the adaptation to different political ideologies as well as the architecture erected by the Communist regime between 1945 and 1990. Both cases deal with residential structures that define the relation between public and private space in the cities as well as shape their building fabric.

MATERIAL AGING AS RESISTANCE: 19TH- AND EARLY 20TH-CENTURY APARTMENT BLOCKS

The 19th-century speculative apartment buildings that formed the main fabric of modern Central and Eastern European cities were based on the idea that social difference could be contained within the same perimeter block. Various classes were located in spaces proportional in size and value to their economic possibilities: affluent bourgeois apartments defined the street front while poorer units were located in back airless courtyards together with small manufacturing activities. The deeper within the block, the greater the subdivision of livable space into smaller areas resulting in a progressive layering. Sectors for different groups functioned as specialized compartments and were often served by separate staircases. A mutual opacity between realms distancing just a few yards existed and is still perceivable nowadays: the more one tries to explore the block, the further she or he is confronted by a labyrinthine coexistence of no-revealing parallel worlds that suddenly emerge out of dark passages, along stairwells, or at the corner of endless corridors. The block was a miniature city and, still functioning as such, does not reveal itself right away; it can only be reconstituted by relating separate locations experienced at different times. The only place of encounter are the courtyards and air shafts that lead, through covered hallways, to the street; a hierarchical sequence of passages that was once used to filter entrance and support social control.

Up to the Second World War, the relentless rhythm of capitalist exploitation of these spaces, marked by the continuous substitution of tenants and by the intervals of work in the manufacturing areas, could not preserve these buildings from consumption. The blocks were characterized by overcrowding

and plagued by epidemics; their perimeter held a compressed body that was being corroded by its own efficiency and capacity for social entropy. The bombs released by the Allies in 1944-45 dissected the cities and exposed their insides. Sudden erasure of whole portions of the fabric projected the world of divisions operating within the blocks on the streets. The curtain of street facades was replaced by a landscape of party walls suddenly opening into urban voids. The continuity of the former fabric was so perfect, the parts so sealed off from each other, that the mutilated portions seemed to bear the full role of fragments evoking a missing whole. What had survived revealed, though, the thinness and superficiality of the enveloping shell. The former unity forced a myriad of separated lives within the belly of the blocks. The bombings disclosed the modern organization of space operating in these interiors as a continuous process of substitution hidden behind an appearance of continuity. Fragmentation, division, erasure, absence—these words describe the condition of the apartment blocks from their very origin, not only after they had been reduced to ruins.

Nineteen forty-five: Europe gets divided into two parts. In the new countries of the Warsaw Pact all the residential buildings, including the 19th-century blocks, undergo the process of socialist collectivization. Private properties are expropriated and apartments officially assigned by the government. The new state officials, though, prefer to promote new high-density social condensers, where the achievements of communist housing production are celebrated. The preexisting structures are let go, and the public housing officials do not survey all the available flats. Many are left abandoned or are squatted and later officially accepted in their current state of occupancy. Maintenance of the structures does not happen; walls crumble, the plaster cracks, and the scars of the war are left uncovered. Forgetfulness, planned and unplanned, permeates whole neighborhoods. Corrosion and combustion inscribe the face of the buildings; while walls peel away revealing geological layers of construction, the smoke produced by thousands of soft-coal stoves (still the prevailing heating system nowadays) gradually covers all the exterior surfaces with a brown-gray film. Nothing expresses the city of Eastern Europe better than this color and its accompanying acrid tang; things seem frozen in a dust coating while, underneath, everything is falling apart. The face of the city comes from within the houses, from the basements where the matter burns and then, liberated in the air, deposits onto everything. Pollution becomes the representation of life going on; the consumption it provokes is the proof of time passing in the face of public immobility.

The apartment blocks, even if collectivized, maintain differences inside. They are full of unaccounted dwellers and spaces; their recesses, so well exploited before, are now full of mystery. People hide their private lives away from public eyes and try to build a protection against the regime. The division of roles of public and private spaces that follows is an act of survival; while streets and squares are colonized by the discourses of state propaganda and police control, the interiors allow individual expression. People construct an area of freedom in the private space, and succeed so particularly in those contexts, like the old blocks, untouched by the socialist production of residential space. On the other side of the Iron Curtain, these same buildings, restored as market valuables, become the scenario of the invasion of artificially created needs brought in by advertising during the postwar economic boom. Consumerism in the

private becomes the public sphere with the consequence that residential interiors are filled by the same messages and mass objects. Paradoxically, the streets and squares—the open spaces of the city—are perceived as the only escape for the individual. The same courtyard blocks in the East and West accommodate uses of space that are mirror images of the relationships between public and private, individual and collective, interior and exterior, freedom and domination. Their original identity is further dissolved to make space for a receptacle that houses different ideologies and their often unpredictable consequences.

After 1990, the distance that separated different uses of the blocks, falls. Everything is restored to market economy and, for the 19th-century apartment buildings, this seems a return to their original state. Things have changed, though; there is no more the desire to integrate social difference, as in the 19th century. The mixture of various inhabitants that survived during the communist regime, makes space for high rental apartments for new professionals working in business and administration. Eastern European cities get divided into zones: the rich occupy the center, the poor and minorities are pushed out at the fringe. The apartment blocks are celebrated as historical material in a rejection of the “modern” ugliness of postwar reconstruction. Educated architects, completely oblivious to the war of differences that characterized these places, declare the blocks the basis of the continuity of the urban fabric. Architectural form is deemed capable of engendering city life as if the role of society and its manifestations were reversible. Behind the rhetoric of “cultural” reconstruction, there are investment groups that want to speculate on the position value in parts of the city that are often centrally located. The blocks are refurbished, and offer upgraded flats: the street facade is plastered with bright colors, the passages are closed by gates, and the courtyards are partitioned in private walled properties. Everything declares its value of immediate present; differences of use and historical modifications are erased, missing portions rebuilt. There is no depth, but a continuous surface that covers instead of revealing things. These buildings speak of completeness and homogeneity while in the past they grew through division. In their perverse capacity to wear historical changes, the blocks accept this further cancellation of memory to make space for the new “Western” normality.

The ghosts of European modern history, though, have not surrendered yet. The past haunts these places and makes the reconstruction dangerous business. The process of establishing who is the owner of these properties has created an administrative chaos, as all the historical periods that have occurred one after the other, lay their claim on the contemporary city. Multiple owners—some escaped in 1933, some resuscitated from the war, others evicted by the communist regime—fight over the same piece of land together with citizens of the former country and new investors. Maps with pre-1945 property lines get superimposed on the actual state of things to foster plans for reestablishing subdivisions. The remaining limbs and the ghost limbs—chunks of matter and portions of void—are cut by ideal lines. There is no definitive agreement, though, as to who these slices of city belong too; at the moment they are homeless.

The general insecurity on property rules and lines has slowed investment in the old blocks. The 19th-century neighborhoods in the former East have been appropriated and restored only in parts, one building here, one there. In between these, the eastern city, rotten and smoked, remains intact.

Walking the streets of Dresden, Lodz, Warsaw or East Berlin is an extraordinary experience as the same kind of building line side by side in two completely different versions: the present and the past, the new and the trashed, the colored and the gray. Different times that used to supersede each other have collapsed into contiguous spaces. The 19th century apartment blocks show an uncanny ability to outlive the different deaths and rebirths imposed on them. They are not only a passive instrument of a further historical change but a presence that resists appropriation. For a moment, modernity—the relentless force of transformation—seem to have found a null zone. How long will this debris of progress be left falling into ruins? How long will the current physical evidence of all the ideologies that have battled on this land last? Not very much longer unfortunately. But for the moment, let's take the opportunity to experience history wrestling with the bodies it tries too often to forget.

Building matter, ruins, remnant structures, emptied spaces seem to take revenge upon the many claims humans make upon them. Walter Benjamin was the first to explore the particular form of memory ruled by the modern city. He discovered that the past lingers more in the material “hardware” of structures than in the events that take place within them. In the “Berlin Chronicle” he wrote:

The more frequently I return to this memories, the less fortuitous it seems to me how slight a role is played in them by people...I wish to write of this afternoon because it made so apparent what kind of regimen cities keep over imagination, and why the city, where people make the most ruthless demands on one another, where appointments and telephone calls, sessions and visits, flirtations and the struggle for the existence grant the individual not a single moment of contemplation, indemnifies itself in memory, and why the veil it has covertly woven out of our lives shows the images of people less than those of the sites of our encounters with others or ourselves.

Memory becomes the only redemption from the continuous change imposed by modernity but cannot be preserved by human acts and events. Architectural structures with their materiality, the “thingness” of cities, become the only repository texts that document the transformations of culture. Remnants and artifacts have therefore a representational role, they speak a figurative language: it is not surprising to find Benjamin stating that “Allegory is in the realm of thought, what ruins are among things.” The memory they evoke re-enacts events and, at the same time, resists appropriation and reduction to a single reason. The past seem to attain a life on its own in architectural matter and in the temporal marks inscribed on it. In another passage of the “Berlin Chronicle” Benjamin observed: “Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but its theater. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred”. The apartment blocks of Eastern Europe, no matter how compulsively are upgraded, will continue to perform the succession of attempts to erase the past with every new layer added on them. This character does not constitute a release from the current role of these buildings as instruments of social segregation but shows an autonomy of materiality and aging as political signifiers that should be evidenced instead of being continuously denied.

RUINS IN REVERSE: HIGH-DENSITY SOCIALIST HOUSING

At the 1959 congress of the Soviet Communist Party in Moscow, Nikita Khrushchev declared that production and technical advancement were from now on the main concerns for the creation of a “total” communist environment. This statement brought to an end the Socialist-Realist period of Soviet architecture initiated by Stalin in the 1930s and characterized by a grand manner with Classicism as a public architectural style. The stress now was less on representation and more on providing basic minimum standards for everybody. Public housing became the main goal of the state programs and prefabrication was identified as the system able to support its construction at a large scale. With this agenda, communist social and industrial production were basically equated and the identification of state work and collective life stressed. Modern Architecture and technological expression were, for the first time, totally accepted as the “official” style for the Eastern Block countries. The 1960s and 1970s became the period of the techno-utopian or “Sputnik” style of Soviet Architecture; its main output are endless districts of high-rise apartment blocks that characterize many Eastern European cities.

The buildings of the new 1960s socialist course were huge social condensers in prefabricated concrete subdivided into thousand units, each one carving the facades with an identical box-like balcony. Space was synthesized in two extremes here: one was the land around the buildings, a negative zone that did not have any form nor use and therefore need not be considered. The other was the single housing unit: a pigeonhole divided from the others yet serially repeating their same characteristics up to exhaustion. This polarization of boxes and no man’s land was further supported by their social use. The units were assigned by the state and privatized, but the property could not be used for profit, which meant total lack of mobility. The spaces surrounding the high-rise hinted at some public value only in the presence of the parking lot and some occasional mural on exterior walls portraying young workers marching towards the future. In between these two worlds lied the same slab structure that made them both possible: the pride of the eastern industrialized building industry and the social tool that was equating all its inhabitants to the same common denominator. No stratification here, just the same services for everybody. These buildings did not look different from all the generic modernist structures built around the world after 1945. Technology showed its anonymous face producing mere empty shells ready to be filled by some ideology, a tool that performed the same three mathematical operations—dividing, repeating and containing. Yet there was something that made these structures unmistakably socialist: the thorough avoidance of every hierarchy and difference that resulted in the lack of identifiable spaces; the gross application of industrialized building techniques such as concrete panels and metal finishes that made these structures almost instant ruins. This second aspect needs more careful consideration since it resulted in a unique form of modernist material aging and explicitly contrasts with the socialist expectations of redemption through technology. The joint forces of a building production of poor quality, concerned more with quantity than craft, and lack of maintenance resulted in the rapid decay of many structures. No effort was made for upgrading individual buildings: the governments handed the structures to the inhabitants and did not care about them after completion; the

occupants of the single units were not accustomed to consider property assigned by the state as something that needs to be preserved as well as did not coordinate their efforts to control the building they were living in. The wrecked environment resulting from this process speaks of the failure of Communism in involving the population in the project of a collective society: it is not surprising to notice that the destiny of the buildings coincided with the progressive transformation of Eastern European governments into bureaucratic labyrinths and of the population into a sum of fearful individualities held together by police control. Regarding the architecture of these complexes, we notice that the adopted language of Modernism and industrialized building production showed less universal than expected and more tied to a capitalist process that continuously upgrades buildings to exploit them economically. Modern buildings have proved to be very vulnerable and their life after completion incredibly important in defining their social and ideological success. Speculative interests provided material maintenance in the West: the unhappy marriage of total collectivization and Modern Architecture in Eastern Europe did not work and produced discontent and material decay. Futuristic building form, industrialized production, representation of collective values and fragmented actual use remained on separate levels. These high-rise buildings fall short of achieving a cohesive Gestalt and remain uncompleted fragments of an uncompletable utopia.

This alienated condition has produced the curious condition of structures that have reached the status of ruins even before the project that created them has been completed. It is almost as if a sudden amnesia followed each socialist building program resulting in the parallel processes of construction and simultaneous decay. The heritage of fifty year of socialist history is that we now have to deal with a new kind of ruins, not half-destroyed but half-constructed, “ready-made” objects that float adrift without reaching signification. Their material aging does not speak of the fall from an original state and does not measure the passage of time. Their image does not synthesize a defined form and, in this respect, these structures resist appropriation even if in a different way from the 19th century apartment blocks. The Eastern European residential slabs seem to prove the existence of a degree of physical and semantic disorder in the built environment that cannot be controlled. The first observer of such phenomena was the American artist Robert Smithson that introduced the concept of entropy to describe the imponderable chaos of the contemporary industrial landscape. In his seminal article “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, N.J.” published in *Artforum* in 1968 he described a trip through undefined building sites and half constructed highways in New Jersey. At a certain point of his travelogue he stated:

That zero panorama seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is — all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of ‘the romantic ruin’ because the buildings don’t fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built. This anti-romantic mise-en-scène suggest the discredited idea of time and other ‘out of date’ things.

Will the zero panorama of endless industrialized ruins in reverse of Eastern Europe fulfill Smithson’s expectation for entropy? Probably yes even if the post-1990 course wants to impose a new image on them and stop their decay. Many former

public high-rises have been bought by private investors and are currently being upgraded. The problems of intervening in these structures are enormous: not only it is a question of running new pipes into the prefab concrete or placing appliances in *Existenzminimum* spaces to meet western standards; what provokes contradiction is mostly the clash of new values with a completely different dwelling ideology. Many housing units during the communist regime were often laid out as a sequence of rooms without service corridor to promote shared living and mutual control among roommate comrades. What to do with them? The current solutions lead to a strange hybrid: the old occupants and dwelling layouts are left in place while the facade is re-clad with new materials to perform a "Western" image. The old fossilized panels are replaced by either prefabricated temple fronts or useless high-tech gimmicks. The old core remains pigeonholed, the new skin superficial and yet they work so well at ignoring each other. What will be the next stage of these larvae in a foreign cocoon? What kind of aging is in store for these marvelous monsters born out of the ideological displacement of the post Cold-War? Is it going to be internal corrosion or new skin-change? The answer is unpredictable but this leaves them the opportunity of *rising* into a further degree of ruination.